CAPTIVATED
BY THE
FAE
JESSICA GRAYSON
ARIA WINTER

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DEDICATION

To my husband: You are not just my husband, you are my best friend and my rock. Thank you for all your love and support. I love you more than words can ever say.

-Jessica Grayson

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CHAPTER 1

ELLA

My pulse pounds in my ears as I race through the forest. The silver moon shines brightly overhead, illuminating my path. I do not know if I go to my salvation or my end; I only understand that I have no other choice. My course was decided by fate long ago, and now I go bravely to meet it.

Everyone knows better than to enter the forest during the silver moon cycle when the magical veil is thin between the human and Fae kingdoms. Trickster Fae are said to wander the woods during this time, casting enchantments on any passerby. They whisk their victims away to their magical lands, never to be heard from again.

Even so… I'd rather take my chances with the Fae than the witch I call my stepmother.

Clutching the torn parchment tightly to my chest, I push through the dense bramble. Thick vines and branches grasp at my form like wiry, skeletal hands, tearing at the fabric of my cloak and tangling in my long, chestnut hair. I do not know whether the magic of the forest is trying to stop me or my fears merely lend the woods their sinister appearance. I only know that whatever future I race toward tonight is better than the one I leave behind me.

My body aches in protest as I press on. With each step, the echoes of remembered pain burn like fire across the torn flesh of my back. An image of my wicked stepmother standing over my crumpled form, the bloody lash still clutched tight in her hand, surfaces in my mind.

She'll pursue me as soon as she realizes what I've stolen from her. I glance down again at the rolled parchment in my hand, praying that the spell will work. If I cannot escape into the Fae kingdom tonight, I do not know where else I can take shelter from my stepmother's wrath. Their lands are the only place I know for certain that her magic holds no power.

This is what fate must have intended for me. My mother was a seer. Her whispered words as she lay dying made little sense at the time, but now that I am older, I understand their intent.

Ahead, I notice the abandoned wooden cottage I discovered many years ago, telling me I'm on the right path. The glowing wall of the veil appears a moment later, sparking hope in my chest. Warmth steals through me as the power of the barrier pulses in warning, trying to dissuade me from coming any closer. It waxes and wanes, allowing glimpses of the other side that would normally be invisible.

I drop to my knees before the veil and unroll the stolen parchment. The silver light of the moon illuminates the sacred text; the letters glow brightly against the worn, yellowing page.

Closing my eyes, I can still remember my mother's voice as she gave me her last words before she died. *On the night of your twenty-third birthday, go to the barrier that separates our kind from the Fae. Be brave, my Ella. Deep in the forest, you will find your destiny.*

CHAPTER 2

RYVAN

I drum my fingers on the wooden tabletop, worn smooth with age. My wings flutter slightly behind me in agitation. It is difficult to hide my impatience as I sit across from Oradon. His eyes are closed in concentration, and a deep line furrows his brow. Sighing heavily, I sit back in my chair, waiting for him to divine my future.

"Patience, my prince," he murmurs without bothering to open his eyes. "It takes time to weave the proper intent into a spell of this kind."

I know he is right, but I am desperate for answers, and I've never been very good at waiting.

My father—the king—demands that I take a bondmate. I'm twenty-five years old and, according to him, already past the proper age to take a wife by now. I glance at my reflection in the mirror over Oradon's shoulder.

My short-cropped black hair is wind-blown from my flight earlier. The sharp, pointed tips of my ears are nearly hidden among a few errant strands. My glowing green eyes reflect with a gleam, belying the darkness that hides behind them—the raw, primal thing that lies just beneath the surface that I struggle to hold back. It is ever-present, always waiting for me to let down my guard.

"Starlight," Oradon says, snapping me back from my dark thoughts.

"Starlight?" I tilt my head to the side, regarding him in confusion. "What does that mean?"

He shrugs. "I do not know, my prince. I only know that it has something to do with your fate, as does the silver moon."

Leaning forward, I cross my arms on the table before me and arch a brow. "You know, Oradon, you only refer to me as your *prince* when you give me any news I may not wish to hear. At all other times, I am *Ryvan*. Why is that?"

He chuckles. "I hadn't noticed."

"We have no need of such formality between us, Oradon, no matter the news. After all, you've known me since I was a child, and you know…" I pause, hesitant to breach an unpleasant subject, and finally settle on, "everything about me."

"That I do," he agrees. He studies me with a piercing gaze a moment before adding, "Though I would ask you to remember that, despite what you may believe, you are not cursed, my prince."

I do not bother with a response. We have argued about this many times. I don't understand why he insists upon revisiting this point.

His glowing blue eyes search mine. "Why do you not believe me?"

I huff out a frustrated breath as I relinquish some of my carefully kept control. It seems he needs a reminder of what I'm capable of.

Energy, raw and untamed, rushes through me. Magic crackles across my skin like lightning, arcing between the tips of my fingers. I lift my hand toward him, allowing him to witness the dark power that courses through my veins.

His mouth drifts open, and despite his attempt to feign nonchalance, the shock is easily read in his eyes. He quickly snaps his jaw shut. "Remember. *You* can control it."

I flex my fingers into my palm. Concentrating, I grit my teeth as I call the power back, forcing it again into submission and praying this is not the day the darkness escapes my control. "So you say."

He opens his mouth to respond, but I stand abruptly from the table and move to the door. I'm tired, and I do not want to wait around for him to impart his wisdom to me—his insistence that I'm stronger

than the curse that runs through my veins. I've already heard the platitudes many times, yet they've made no difference.

Neither has his divination, this evening, of my future.

"Goodnight, Oradon," I call over my shoulder as I step through the door and out into the hallway.

With my hands curled into fists at my side, I make my way through the castle to return to my room. Several guards along the corridor bow as I pass. I dip my chin in acknowledgment as my wings flutter agitatedly behind me. How can my father expect me to take a bondmate when I hold such a terrible darkness inside me? I refuse to subject a mate to my curse.

Frustration burns through me, and I want nothing more than to fly out the window, passing the gardens for the forest beyond.

However, it is late. If I were to leave now, Father would most certainly notice. It wouldn't be long before he'd send someone after me, worried that I may have been injured or met whatever crisis he imagines in his head.

Ever since my mother was murdered, he has been overprotective of me and my younger brother, Eryl. I should be thankful; he used to be much worse. When we were children, he assigned us two guards each, shadowing our every move.

It is already dark outside. Floating orbs of light line the hallways and corridors. Their blue flames cast strange shadows along the gray stone walls and silver finishes, lending the usual haunted nighttime undertone to the interior of the castle.

At night, dark memories seem more prone to resurfacing, and the ghosts of my past return to torment me. Closing my eyes, I can still picture their faces—the dying screams of a dozen men echo in my mind. They were not innocent by any means, but I cannot help but believe I am a monster for having killed them in the manner that I did.

I walk past my father's chambers and note the illumination that leaks through beneath the door, telling me he's still awake. I take great care to move as quietly as possible, continuing down the hallway. The last thing I want is to alert him of my presence and receive another lecture on the need to procure a bondmate.

Carefully, I push open the door to my bedroom. I wince inwardly when the heavy wood creaks on the hinges as it swings in. If that does not draw my father's attention, I'll be surprised. He has always been possessed of exceptional hearing, especially when it comes to my movements. Hopefully, he has simply fallen asleep in bed as he often does, with one of his many books resting on his chest.

With a wave of my hand, I conjure light to illuminate the darkened interior of my chambers. The glowing blue orb hovers in my palm for a moment before I flick it toward the wall to rest in its usual place.

Removing my cloak, I hang it on the chair of my desk. Crumpled parchments lie scattered across the worn top and the surrounding floor. Each is an attempt to explain to my father why I do not need a bondmate just yet. All fail to convey my point compellingly, however.

I turn my attention to my bed along the far wall and sigh heavily. How long has it been since I infused the wood with magic? The thick vines that wrap around the four posts are beginning to show signs of distress, their green, heart-shaped leaves drooping since I've neglected to tend them as often as I should.

I lie back on the plush, green comforter and stare at the canopy overhead. I reach back and trace my hand along the headboard. The dark wood of the frame and the vines are smooth beneath my fingers. Closing my eyes, I concentrate on my magic, infusing the entire structure with some much-needed life.

After a moment, I open my eyes and notice the leaves are no longer wilting. A deep frown curves my mouth when I see tiny buds have now appeared on the vines. When they bloom, they will make the loveliest, glowing white flowers, but I dread their appearance. Every Fae knows what the blossoms herald. For me, they mean nothing but trouble.

My magic is communicating to me that my mating cycle approaches. I will be forced to find a mate or lock myself away until it ends.

Neither option sounds appealing.

I pray Father does not come in here and see this. I'd never hear the end of it, I'm certain.

A cool breeze drifts in from the balcony along the far wall, swaying the green silk curtains. With a flick of my wrist, I gesture to the fireplace across the room and light the hearth.

I raise my hand, readying tendrils of magic to shut the balcony door as well, but pause when my eyes note something even more worrisome than the impending flowers on the vines of my bed.

I stand and move toward the balcony, lifting my gaze to the darkened sky. The silver moon shines brightly overhead. Many find it lovely, but I think it is only a herald of my doom.

"What's wrong with you?" My brother's voice draws my attention.

Unlike me, Eryl can move with stealth… even without trying. He does this often, so I'm not surprised when I turn to find him lying on my chaise lounge. Propped up on one elbow, he sips on a glass of wine, looking for all the world like nothing can faze him.

With dark hair and green eyes, we could pass as twins despite the fact that he is two years younger than me.

I glance once more at the moon and sigh heavily. "Do you not remember?" I ask bitterly. "Father told me that when the next silver moon cycle comes, he would send announcements to all corners of the kingdom, commanding that every eligible maiden attend the Silver Moon Ball."

My brother's pointed ears perk up. "So what?"

My wings flutter in irritation as I purse my lips. "I'm supposed to choose a bondmate at the event—my future queen. I wouldn't expect you to understand, Eryl."

He rolls his eyes. "Really, Ryvan, is that such a bad thing? Do you not see that Father is trying to help you? By inviting every eligible maiden in the kingdom, there must be one among them who is right for you."

"And what if I do not want a bondmate?"

Eryl swirls his glass. Bringing it to his lips, he takes another drink and arches a brow. "Unfortunately, my dear brother, you do not have a choice. You're the heir to the kingdom of Anara. You cannot remain single your entire life."

With another heavy sigh, I turn my gaze to the sky once more, staring up at the silver moon. I envy my younger brother. Because he is not the heir apparent, he can do whatever he wants with his life. He has no idea what it's like to bear so much responsibility from the very beginning. My earliest memories are of my teachers reminding me who I was and what would be expected of me some day.

My brother's hand on my shoulder draws my attention back to him. "You may be worried for nothing, you know."

"I do not know what you're talking about." I feign ignorance, not wishing to speak of it again.

"You think you are cursed, but you're not, Ryvan." His tone is tinged with sympathy. "I know it."

My eyes snap up to his. "You know nothing," I reply, unable to hide the bitterness in my tone.

Eryl pats my shoulder. "You're my brother. You are *not* cursed."

I shrug his hand off. "I don't care what Father says, I am not going to choose a mate at the ball."

"*Yes*, you will," Father's thunderous voice sounds from the doorway.

My head snaps toward him. "No, Father. I will not."

He levels me with a dark glare. "You *will* choose someone at the ball."

"You cannot expect me to pick someone I just met," I state incredulously. "Someone I do not even know beyond one turn around the floor."

His eyes sweep to my bed posts and the tiny buds along the vines. He arches a brow. "It would seem you are running out of time, my son. But do not worry. You will find someone at the Silver Moon Ball."

I scowl. "And if I do not?"

"You must," he grinds out. "As much as I may wish it, I will not live forever, and you must secure the throne before I'm gone."

By *secure the throne*, I understand that he means *produce an heir*. However, I refuse. I will not be forced to take a bondmate. I won't subject someone else to my curse.

Trying to lighten the mood, Eryl chimes in. "You speak as if you were three hundred years old already, Father. You're only fifty-five."

He narrows his eyes at my brother. Eryl grins mischievously then takes another sip of his wine.

Father grits his teeth in frustration. "Do not fight me on this, Ryvan. I'm doing this for your own good."

He spins on his heels and steps out into the hallway, slamming the door shut behind him. Anger rises in my chest as dark magic courses through my veins like fire and arcs across my palms like lightning, crackling between the tips of my fingers. I curl my hands into fists, trying to control it.

It builds like a giant wave behind a dam, ready to burst forth in all its destructive power and terrible glory.

Eryl inhales sharply, his eyes glued in horror to my closed hands.

I hate the fear on his face, and I hate the burden I've been given to bear. Why has fate cursed me this way?

Worried that I'll lose my control, I rip my cloak from the chair and throw it over my shoulders. Rushing past my brother, I make my way to the door.

"Where are you going?" he calls out.

"Anywhere but here," I murmur, not bothering to look back.

Pulling my hood over my head, I make my way out to the stables and my horse, Mirna. I could have just flown off the balcony by myself, but that would have been too conspicuous. Every guard in the towers would have seen me take off, and my father would almost assuredly have me followed.

Having sensed my presence, Mirna lifts her head as soon as I enter, then dips her nose in greeting. *"You are upset,"* she whispers in my mind.

"Yes."

I grasp a handful of her white mane and pull myself onto her back, not bothering with a saddle.

"Where would you like to go?"

"The forest."

Instead of questioning me as I'd half expected her to, she takes off in a gallop, leaving the stables. We race through the gardens and toward the low wall. Covered by vines and tall grass, it is my secret way in and out of the palace grounds when I ride.

Mirna picks up speed and leaps over the wall. Her hooves pound the ground as she runs toward the forest. The thick canopy of trees may appear menacing to some, but to me, they are a symbol of freedom.

Wild and untamed, their thick branches reach for my cloak as we pass as if beckoning me to stay a

while and lose myself in the woods. Tall trees with massive dark-gray trunks twist toward the sky, competing for the sunlight. They are covered in heart-shaped, violet leaves, and tiny buds of white flowers dot the branches, glowing beneath the damned silver moonlight.

We make our way deep into the woods, toward the veiled barrier. It is a fantasy of mine to cross it someday, making me love the forest even more. In my dreams, this is the place to which I escape—into the human kingdom of Eryadon beyond the veil, to live my life in hiding among the humans, disguised as one of their kind.

The unmistakable glow of magic ahead tells me we are close. As I scan the wall, I notice areas where the light waxes and wanes as it thins. Something about this moon weakens the barrier, though our scholars do not understand why.

My kind rarely comes to the veil, which is another reason it appeals to me. I can burn off my energy when my powers become too strong to contain, and no one is around to bear witness to my dark tendencies.

I slide off Mirna's back and hold up my hands, allowing the magic to burn through me. A ball of flame hovers over my palms, growing until I cannot contain it. I hurl it toward the closest tree, watching in horror as it slams into the trunk in a fiery display of destruction.

Before it can burn through the wood, I concentrate my energy on the winding river nearby. Gathering as much water as I can, I direct it toward the tree, dousing the flames.

The darkness within calls to me, beckoning me to surrender to its will. The desire to give myself over is maddening in its intensity as raw and untamed energy flows through my veins like liquid fire.

I look to the sky and raise my hands, summoning the power of the wind. Great swirling chaos surrounds me as I stand in the eye of the gathering storm.

"Ryvan!" Mirna's alarmed cry echoes in my mind, and I release my hold on the elements.

The power that burned in my veins has now ebbed to more manageable levels, drained so that it is much easier to control.

I turn my gaze again to the waning wall, able to catch glimpses of the human kingdom of Eryadon as the veil shimmers and fades. Something moves on the other side, drawing my attention. Magic arcs across the tips of my fingers, instinctively readying to defend against any threat breaking through the barrier.

I instruct Mirna to hide in the trees as I creep closer. The veil thins just enough that I'm able to see through it clearly. My eyes widen, and my mouth drifts open when I notice a human.

She is the most stunning female I have ever beheld. As I study her, I am grateful for my superior night vision. Her chestnut hair falls around her shoulders in long, silken waves. Her eyes are a vivid, striking shade of blue that reminds me of clear skies. Her face is heart-shaped, and I notice a light dusting of tiny, pigmented dots across the bridge of her nose and her cheeks. I have never seen these before, but then again, I've never seen a human up close until now.

She is a lovely and delicate creature. I never expected to find such beauty among humans, and I am completely enthralled. I thought only my people or the Elves possessed such charming features.

She drops to her knees before the barrier and lifts a dagger from her belt. I watch in horror as she draws it across her palm. A tear slips down her cheek while she begins reciting words in an ancient tongue that, although unfamiliar in tone, I recognize straight away.

Shock, followed quickly by anger, rushes through me. No wonder she is so beguiling; she's a witch.

She's trying to bring down the barrier.

CHAPTER 3

ELLA

A tear slips down my cheek as I unfold the parchment and study the spell. I pull the dagger from my belt and draw it across my palm, biting back a whimper of pain as it slices my flesh. Balling my hand into a fist, I allow the crimson droplets to drip to the ground as I speak the ancient words of enchantment.

Warmth fills my body as long tendrils of magic unfurl all around me. The power of the spell whispers across my skin in a gentle caress as I focus my intent upon lowering the veil.

A spark of light flickers deep within, turning into a roaring flame. Energy rushes through my veins like wildfire, leaving behind nothing but ash in its wake.

I open my eyes as part of the veil shatters in a brilliant display. The faintly glowing magic scattering like flakes of snow, dancing in wondrous patterns on the wind as it swirls all around me.

With the barrier down, the kingdom of Anara is clearly visible on the opposite side. Tall trees with thick and twisted dark gray trunks weave together to create a dense forest. Their heart-shaped leaves of purple with tiny glowing white flowers sway gently in the cool night breeze. Fireflies flit back and forth, their bodies alight with a golden glow, lending an ethereal appearance to these magical woods. The stories I've heard of this place hardly do it justice. It is nothing short of enchanting.

My heart stops and then begins pounding as something moves through the dense vegetation. I still, squinting into the darkness as if that will somehow help me to see. The silhouette of a man comes into focus, and I gasp when I realize he is walking this way.

Still on my knees, I'm paralyzed by fear and unable to move. Glowing green eyes stare down at me. The silver moon casts just enough light to illuminate his short, black hair, the pointed tips of his ears and the sharp lines of his face. With a masculine, square jaw that could cut glass, and a sharp nose and brow, he is fierce and beautiful all at once—handsome in a way I have heard only the Fae or Elvenkind could ever be.

"Who are you?" His voice is deep and commanding. "What are you doing here?"

My entire body is trembling as I force myself to stand. My gaze travels over his form.

He's so tall, the top of my head is barely level with his chin. Broad shoulders taper to a narrow waist. He's dressed in a dark tunic and pants that appear to be made of the finest green silk. His clothing does little to hide the muscular form beneath. With a lean, yet powerful build, he is masculine perfection made manifest before me. Silver moonlight glints off something behind him, and when he steps forward my jaw drops. He has wings.

My breath catches in my throat. This man is Fae.

"Who are you?" He asks again, his expression thunderous.

"I—" I hesitate, afraid to give him my name. A cautionary warning, from my childhood, flits through my mind.

Never give a Fae or otherworldly creature your name. Names have power that can be used against you.

I meet his eyes evenly and square my shoulders, feigning confidence and bravery that I do not feel at this moment. "I will not give you my name."

His brow furrows deeply as if he cannot believe what I've just said. He steps closer. "Give me your name, Witch, and tell me why you shattered this part of the veil."

“Witch?” I give him an incredulous look. “I’m not a witch.”

His gaze drops to the bloody dagger in my hand and the spell parchment laid out before me. He arches a brow. “You may as well admit the truth. You used magic to break through the barrier—a crime punishable by death.”

I gasp and drop the blade as I gesture animatedly to the spell, all my earlier bravado gone under threat of death. “I know what this looks like, but I’m—I’m not a witch. I swear.”

Tipping his chin up, he stares down his nose at me imperiously. “I am Ryvan of the Fae Kingdom of Anara. I demand that you explain yourself.”

“You gave me your name?” I ask, disbelief lacing my tone.

“Of course, I did. Now, I command you to tell me yours and explain why you broke through the barrier.”

I frown. “I thought…”

My voice trails off as I think better of questioning his logic in giving me his name. After all, if names have power, he may have mistakenly given me power over him.

CHAPTER 4

RYVAN

When I gave her my name, I declined to tell her that I am the crown prince of Anara. I want to know how she will react to me without knowledge of my title.

I have never seen a human up close before. My gaze travels over the delicate, curved shells of her ears. Sky-blue eyes stare up into mine. I could so easily lose myself in their depths. My nostrils flare as I drink in her scent. She smells of strawberries and sunshine. Her hair spills over her shoulders in long, chocolate waves. Flexing my fingers into my palm, I fight the urge to run them through the silken strands as I imagine tipping her face up to mine and tasting of her full, pink lips.

With a slight clench of my jaw, I force myself to focus. I cannot be attracted to a human. Surely, she must have cast some sort of enchantment to enthrall me. I am angered this witch would seek to manipulate me in this way.

"You thought what?" I snap. "Out with it."

"Well, you gave me your name, and… aren't names supposed to have power?"

I cock my head to the side, narrowing my eyes as I consider her question. She cannot be a witch. No one who practices magic would ever believe such a ridiculous myth. I cross my arms over my chest.

"It's obvious to me now that you are no witch."

Her eyes widen. "Did you just read my mind?"

"Of course not," I scoff. "That is against the law. No, I knew because of the ridiculous fairy tale that you believe."

"Fairy… tale?"

"About names having power. No proper witch would ever believe such a thing."

She looks hopeful. "So… now that you've confirmed I'm not a witch, am I still in trouble?"

My gaze drops to the bloodied knife and the spelled parchment. I arch a brow. "That depends."

"On what?"

"How did you come by this spell?"

"I—" She cuts off, studying me warily.

It's easy to see she does not trust me. But I must know why she broke the barrier, especially since she's obviously not a practitioner of magic. So, I decide to use the only leverage I have. "You shattered part of the veil. That is a crime in my kingdom. Punishable by death. I suggest you explain yourself quickly."

She gasps, and I hate the fear that fills her eyes at my lie. She is not the first to bring down the veil during the silver moon cycle when it is thin, and the punishment certainly isn't as severe as death. It is usually a hefty fine, or a few days spent in the castle prison. However, she does not know this, and I want an answer to my question.

"Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I… stole it." She reluctantly admits. "From a real witch."

My mouth falls open. "You stole from a witch? Are you mad?"

She swallows hard and glances down at her hands. "I had no choice."

"That is ridiculous," I counter. "Everyone has a choice. Does the witch know that you stole from her?"

My gaze sweeps across the forest over her shoulder. If the witch is aware of this, death will surely be coming for her. And swiftly.

The raw energy of my dark magic crackles like lightning across the tips of my fingers as if readying to defend her, although I do not know why I feel so fiercely protective of this human.

She shakes her head. "Not yet. But she'll know soon enough, I suspect. I slipped some *vyltarian* in her tea this evening. She should not wake until noon tomorrow."

I cannot believe this human. She is either mad or very brave; I'm uncertain which. Witches are very powerful beings; it is never wise to cross one. "You *do know* that stealing from a witch is dangerous, do you not?"

"Of course, I do. At first, I searched for a spell to turn her into a frog or a cat—anything that would render her harmless. But the transformation enchantments are too complicated and require many ingredients I do not have. When I found this one, I thought I could use it to get away from her."

Ah. All the pieces fall into place now. "You were hoping to escape into my kingdom."

"Yes."

I frown. "Humans are not allowed in Anara."

Her head jerks back. "Why not?"

"We do not trust outsiders. Certainly not humans, at least."

She looks down at her hands. "Then, I have no hope."

My nostrils flare as I scent the tears she struggles to hold back. Despite wanting to appear authoritative as befits my status, I am not a heartless monster. I step closer to her, and she lifts her gaze. Her luminous blue eyes search mine.

"Why did you steal from the witch?"

"She plans to sell me to a man. At the end of the month, I'm to become his wife as payment for her debts to him." She lowers her gaze, blinking back tears. "He is cruel and I cannot marry him. Please," she begs. "Is there no way I may seek asylum in your lands?"

Her plea tears at my heart. Anyone brave enough to steal from a witch must be desperate to escape indeed. I tip my head to the side, considering. "Perhaps we may help each other."

"What do you mean?"

"I would like to propose a deal. My father wants me to take a wife, but—"

She steps back quickly and tugs her cloak close to her chest as if trying to shield herself from my gaze. "I'd sooner die than give myself to you."

I blink several times in shock. She stares up at me as if I were some sort of hideous troll, demanding payment in flesh to cross a bridge.

I'm not sure whether to be amused or offended. I've always considered myself rather handsome. At least, that's what my grandmother always told me, as did the dozens of women who came to court last season to vie for my hand.

But I suppose they could have been lying. After all, I was my grandmother's favorite grandson—so I was probably perfect in her eyes for that reason alone. And the other women may simply be after my status and title.

Judging by the expression on this woman's face, I fear this may be truth. My wounded pride may never recover from this devastating blow.

"You cannot have my firstborn child, either," she adds.

I stare at her, dumbstruck. What in the name of the gods is she talking about now? "What does your firstborn child have to do with anything?"

She gives me a wary look. "I've heard that's something your kind often ask for when making a

deal."

I roll my eyes. "The rumors your people spread about mine are ridiculous."

Her brow furrows. "It's not true, then?"

I shake my head. "Those were the olden days. My people are forbidden from making deals like that now." I pause. "It has been at least five hundred years since that particular law was passed, by the way."

Her lips part, but she quickly snaps her jaw shut. Her brows pinch together in contemplation. "What kind of deal are you suggesting, then?"

I gesture to a felled trunk nearby for her to sit. She does, and I take a seat beside her. "As I mentioned, my father wants me to take a wife."

It does not escape my notice that she scoots further away at my statement, wounding my pride even more. *Am I really that unattractive?* I'd always heard that her kind found mine very handsome and beautiful. Perhaps this is simply rumor.

She winces and my gaze drops to her hand. I note the cut on her palm is still seeping blood. "May I?" I gesture to her injury.

Cautiously, she extends her hand out to me and I assess her wound.

My brother, Eryl, is very skilled in healing magic. He can repair even the most devastating of injuries. I worry this may be beyond my abilities, but as I study the cut, I realize it is not very deep. I should be able to mend it. I lift my eyes to hers. "I can heal this if you'd like."

She hesitates a moment, and then nods.

Carefully, I hover my open palm above her injured one. Closing my eyes, I focus on conjuring the magic within me that should come easily but it does not. I could sooner destroy than heal, but I do not tell her this. That is simply the way of the dark magic that dominates my nature.

Something that would be simple for a Light Fae to conjure—such as a healing spell—is difficult for me. Whereas the dark magic they dare not even attempt, is as easy for me as breathing.

I focus all my energy upon her wound and when she gasps, my eyes snap open to find her staring down at her palm in wonder. My heart stutters and stops as her lips curve into a stunning smile.

"That's amazing. Thank you so much, Ryvan." The tense set of her shoulders relaxes and I am glad to note she appears more at ease now that I've healed her. "You were saying?" she prompts.

Drawing in a deep breath, I continue. "The Silver Moon Ball is coming soon. Every eligible woman in the kingdom will attend. And I"—I gesture to my chest—"am supposed to choose a wife from among them."

Her brow furrows. "So why do you need me?"

"I do not want a wife, and I am sure to be swarmed by dozens of interested women at the ball."

She snorts out a laugh but quickly covers her mouth to stifle it, and my pride takes another heavy blow. Her eyes dance with barely restrained amusement. "Well, *someone* certainly thinks an awful lot of himself."

I purse my lips, choosing to ignore her jab. "If my father believes someone has caught my eye, and I play the part of the besotted and lovesick fool… When that someone decides to reject me, my father might leave me alone for a while to wallow in my sorrows." I pause. "That person could be *you*."

She frowns. "I'm human. You said that my kind are not allowed in your kingdom."

"This is truth, but I could conjure a spell—an enchantment to change your appearance and hide what you are from my people so you could cross the veil undetected and attend the ball."

"Then what?" she asks, and it's easy to see she is weighing whether to trust me.

"I'll sneak you through our kingdom and secure passage for you on one of the ships from the port

of Luryndale. The ice should be completely melted in a few weeks—just in time for the ball—and the seas will be safe enough for ships to travel again. You can move to the lands in the far north and seek out a quiet life among the people in the kingdom of Arnafell."

Hope once again enters her eyes. "Can you change my appearance now? Allow me to hide in Anara until after the ball?"

"Unfortunately, no," I reply, hating the despair that steals over her features at my words. "The spell will not hold for very long, and I've no way of making it permanent. However, I can cast an enchantment on this part of the woods, shielding you from the witch until then."

She lowers her eyes. "No. She's very powerful, and I fear she would see right through it."

Perhaps she is right. Witches possess varying degrees of power, and I do not know the one who plagues her. She could be able to see through my spell.

I'm worried, however, for this human. If the witch finds out that she stole, she will punish her—perhaps even kill her. "What will you do about the witch?"

She shrugs. "I do not believe she'd kill me. I'll just have to go back, bide my time until the ball, and hope she doesn't realize that I took this." She gestures to the parchment.

I tilt my head to the side. "You are not a witch, and yet, you were able to use this spell with an offering of your blood." I gesture to the broken barrier. "That means you may be able to cast another. I will give you the words of enchantment to place the parchment back in her book, mending the torn page as if it were never removed in the first place."

I dislike the idea of her having to injure herself again to do this, so I pluck a leaf from a nearby tree. Using this, she will not need to offer her blood to conjure the energy needed for the enchantment. Concentrating a moment, I infuse it with a slight bit of my magic and hand it to her. "Here. You may use this to cast the spell. You will need to lay it over the torn seam for it to work."

She takes the leaf, studying it curiously before lifting her gaze again to mine. "You would help me?"

I'm surprised by the astonishment in her tone. She must have heard many terrible things about my people. "Yes."

"But… why? That's not part of our arrangement."

The truth is, I hate the idea of her returning to the witch. I wish there were some way to help her further. I cannot imagine toiling in the service of such a vile creature. I've heard witches treat those they enslave cruelly.

I do not want this woman to believe I am soft, however. We have not sealed our contract yet. So, I lie. "I need to make certain you are in one piece so you may help me. It would not do for the witch to turn you into a frog or some such thing before you are able to attend the ball, now would it?"

She laughs, the sound is light, airy, and quite lovely, if I'm being entirely honest with myself. It also eases my worries somewhat. If she is able to find my words amusing, it must mean she would never expect the witch to punish her so severely.

Still, I feel compelled to check. "You are certain the witch will not harm you?"

"Not if I return the spell before she realizes it is gone."

"You are certain you have time to return it before she awakens?"

"Yes. I gave her quite a bit of *vyltarian* root."

Relief fills me as I meet her gaze evenly. "All right. Repeat these words after me."

I give her the words of the spell, and she repeats them without error on her first try.

"Excellent," I tell her.

"Will you teach me some more?"

"Magic?"

She nods.

I arch a brow. "That is not part of our arrangement."

"We haven't made an arrangement yet," she corrects me. "We are still discussing terms."

My brows rise in astonishment. She is dictating terms for our agreement? I study her curiously. My nostrils flare, and I detect a hint of her fear on the wind, but she hides it well as her gaze holds mine. How fascinating. I think on her admission of stealing from a witch. Perhaps she is both mad *and* very brave.

"Well?" she asks.

"Fine. But only basic protection and defense spells. That is all."

Her lips curve into a stunning smile. She extends her delicate hand toward me, and I take it.

The moment her skin touches mine, I'm standing in a field of lavender. She stands before me dressed in a simple, white-silk gown. Her hair is twisted in a lovely, braided crown atop her head, a few long, spiraling tendrils framing her delicate, heart-shaped face.

Her luminous blue eyes pierce mine as I place a wreath of white flowers atop her head. I bow low, and she responds in kind. I take both her hands in mine and repeat the ancient words of the bonding ceremony aloud. "You are mine, and I am yours."

I wait with great anticipation as she speaks her vows in return. "I am yours, and you are mine." She wraps her arms around me, pressing her lips to my own in a tender kiss.

A small gasp escapes me as the vision fades just as quickly as it first appeared.

She leans closer, studying me. "Are you all right?"

I blink several times as I come back to myself. "I—I am well." I stumble over my words.

"Good." She gives me a dazzling smile that could rival the brightness of the sun. "So, how shall we begin?"

"Begin?" I ask, unable to concentrate, transfixed by her soft, pink lips, and remembering the kiss in my vision.

"My lessons," she explains. "Can you meet here again tomorrow?"

"I—" My mind goes blank. After what I'm sure is only a moment but feels like an eternity, I somehow manage to reply, "Yes."

"All right, Ryvan." She grins. "I'll see you here tomorrow."

"Of course." It occurs to me that she has still not told me her name. She turns to leave, but I call out, stopping her. "Your name. You have not yet given it to me."

She glances over her shoulder with a smile.

"It's Ella."

My heart stutters and stops.

"Ella," I murmur. A name that means *starlight* in the ancient tongue.

CHAPTER 5

ELLA

As I make my way back to the estate, my thoughts return compulsively to Ryvan. I glance down at my palm and study it beneath the soft light of the moon. Only a thin line across my skin remains from the injury. I flex my hand and marvel that there is not even the slightest hint of pain.

That was kind of him to heal me. He certainly did not have to; it wasn't part of our agreement. I've never actually met a Fae before tonight. From all the stories I've heard, I thought they were cruel tricksters. I flex my hand again. I'm glad to know that I was wrong.

The rumors I'd heard about their handsomeness, however, are truth. It's not as if I have never seen an attractive man before, but there is something about Ryvan that draws me in. With his glowing green eyes and sharp, angular features, he is both fierce and handsome all at once.

Perhaps his allure is inherent to his people. I've heard the Fae and Elvenkind are known for their ability to charm unsuspecting humans. Maybe I'm not immune to whatever effects I've heard they have on others.

However, some instinct deep inside tells me this is more than just a charm. It cannot be chance that I met him tonight. Not after what my mother told me on her deathbed.

Her final words repeat in my mind.

On the night of your twenty-third birthday, go to the barrier that separates our kind from the Fae. Be brave, my Ella. Deep in the forest, you will find your destiny.

She was a seer. Perhaps she knew that I'd meet Ryvan, and he would be the one to help me escape my evil stepmother.

Or maybe my destiny is something altogether different. My cheeks flush with warmth as I think of him again. Although I was only a child, I remember my mother telling me that she fell in love with my father the first time they met. She claimed something inside her knew he was the one.

My thoughts turn again to Ryvan, but I push them away, believing them to be the beginnings of an infatuation like the ones the staff chat about in the halls. Surely, that is what this is.

I force myself to focus. I must return to the estate before my stepmother awakens—before she realizes that I've taken a page from her precious spellbook.

The journey back to the estate seems much shorter than the trip out, but perhaps that's because renewed fear lends flight to my steps.

When I reach the main house, it is still dark inside. I creep down the hallway, careful to make as little noise as possible while checking on my stepfamily. Fear trickles down my spine as I peer into my stepmother's room, afraid I'll find her already gone—awake and waiting for me in her workroom.

A silent sigh of relief moves through me when her silhouette shifts in her bed as she rolls onto her side, still asleep.

I crack the door open just enough to check on my two stepsisters. Each still lies in her bed, none the wiser that I was ever gone.

Carefully, I make my way down to the basement. I run my hand along the wall to guide me, not wanting to use any light and risk awakening or alerting anyone to my presence. With each step on the spiral stone staircase, my surroundings seem to grow darker as I descend into the bowels of the estate.

When I reach the bottom of the stairwell, I make my way along the narrow hallways until I reach a

heavy wooden door. Cautiously, I push it open and enter my stepmother's workroom. In the darkness, the glowing green light of her cauldron provides just enough illumination that I'm able to creep forward as my eyes adjust to the dim lighting.

I've cleaned this space enough times over the years that I'm familiar with every object in this room. I've dusted all the bookshelves regularly.

I retrieve the spellbook. The ancient tome is so heavy, I struggle to lift it from the shelf and onto the worktable. It lands with an audible *thump*, and I cringe inwardly as the sound echoes in the otherwise silent house.

The pages are brittle and yellowed with age, so I take great care as I open them and find the one I need. I unroll the parchment and lay it gently on the open book, carefully aligning the torn edges. Ryven specified that it was important to line them up perfectly before casting the spell and to place the leaf directly on the seam. Otherwise, the page would reattach unevenly.

I struggle unsuccessfully to make the break lie flat. The parchment has been rolled up for so long this evening that it refuses to conform to its original shape. I find a nearby candlestick and stone and place them on the top and bottom of the page to hold it straight and firmly in place. I place the leaf over the torn edges.

A bead of wax drips onto the page, and I gasp. If the candle wax is this soft, it means my stepmother recently lit this candle. I can only pray she did not notice this book had been tampered with.

Even as this thought crosses my mind, I quickly dismiss it. If she'd discovered the tear, she would be awake and after me already, not asleep in her bed.

I carefully scrape the bead of wax from the page and step back. Lifting my hands, I focus my attention on the book and recite the spell as Ryvan taught me.

A cool breeze whips through the room, ruffling my hair and sending a chill down my spine as magic arcs between the tips of my fingers and flows to the page in glowing purple wisps. I watch in wonder as the magic lines either side of the torn edges and draws them together. The leaf fades into the parchment as it works. By the time the enchantment is done, I blink down in astonishment. It's just as he said; the page looks as though it has never been torn.

Carefully, I close the book and place it back on the shelf. No sooner have I slid it back into place than the sound of footsteps on the stairs draws my attention.

I've lived under her thumb long enough that I recognize the cadence of my stepmother's shoes as they clip along the stone floor. She shouldn't be awake yet. I must not have given her as much vyltarian root, in her tea, as I thought I did, or perhaps she is immune to its normally potent effects.

My heart pounds and my limbs begin trembling as I grab a nearby broom. It's too late to hide. I smooth my sweaty palms down my dress and then begin sweeping, pretending I'm simply down here cleaning.

The door cracks open, and my stepmother enters. She holds a candlestick out before her, the low light casting her violet skin in harsh relief. With her deep purple hair twisted atop her head in a tight braid I suspect she must have come here straight from her bed. Her amber, reptilian eyes study me intently.

After my father died, she and my stepsisters stopped bothering with the enchantment that made them appear human so she could trick him into marriage. Even in her goblin form, she is beautiful. But that beauty belies a heart of darkness.

Panic tightens my chest, and I freeze in place as she levels a glare at me.

"What are you doing down here?"

"I—I was sweeping." I stumble over my words as I meekly hold out the broom. "I thought I might get an early start on my chores for the day."

She narrows her eyes at me for a moment before allowing them to drift over the room as if checking that everything is still in its place. She must be satisfied with what she sees, otherwise her anger would be swift and unyielding.

"I want this entire area spotless." Her cold gaze holds mine. "Mr. Malforn will be joining us for dinner tomorrow evening. I'll expect you to look your best."

Ice fills my veins but I somehow manage to respond. "Of course, Stepmother."

As soon as she's gone, I fists my hands in my long skirt to still their trembling as I recall the last time Mr. Malforn came to the estate. She has sold me to him, and we are to be married in less than a month. He's a cruel man. When he visited, he tried to touch me improperly. When I pushed him away, he hit me and then sneered. He told me I'd be his soon enough anyway to do with as he pleased.

Closing my eyes briefly, I push down my dread at seeing him again and concentrate on cleaning everything in the room thoroughly. The last time I missed a spot, my stepmother gave me ten lashes. It was so terrible I could barely walk the next day.

When I'm finished with my chores, I make my way up to my room, among the servants' quarters in the far tower. My bedroom used to be just down the hallway from my stepmother's before my father died. Not long after, she moved me to this cold and remote part of the estate.

I am thankful, however, that it is far enough from the main part of the house that my stepfamily hardly ever comes up here. It is small and drafty, but it is mine. The small hearth in the corner works to provide at least some warmth in the winters. I know there are worse situations to be in than this.

I shudder inwardly as I think on the workhouses in the main part of the city and pray that my fate never leads me to those places.

A dress is waiting for me on the bed when I enter. I recognize it as belonging to one of my stepsisters. It is a lovely shade of pink but far too low in the front for my liking. But I suppose that is the point of all this.

My stepmother wants me to appear as enticing as possible to my future husband. After all, she needs his money to pay off her debts. I dread seeing him tomorrow, but at least I know now I won't have to marry him, thanks to Ryvan.

It is still a few hours until I'm to meet my new Fae friend, so I decide to get some sleep since I had none last night. I light a fire in the small fireplace and move my bed a bit closer to take advantage of its heat.

Quickly, I slip into my sleeping gown and crawl beneath the covers. Mesmerized by the dancing flames of the hearth, my mind begins to wander. My thoughts return to Ryvan, and I know in my heart we did not meet by chance. It was destiny, just as my mother foretold.

It must be.

For the first time in a long time, I have something to look forward to.

Tonight, I will meet with him again.

CHAPTER 6

RYVAN

Sleep has eluded me all night long. As the soft morning light filters in through the window, my thoughts keep returning to Ella. I am worried for her, and cannot help but be concerned that the witch may have discovered her deception. I should never have let her go. I should have found a way to bring her here… convinced my father to offer her sanctuary from the wrath of the witch.

I roll onto my stomach and bury my head in the pillow with a low groan. Father would never have agreed to it. He hates humans. Still… if she is hurt, I will never forgive myself.

I sit up in bed and run a hand roughly through my hair. Why am I so concerned for someone I only recently met?

Closing my eyes, I picture her long, silken, brown hair and ice-blue eyes. She is more beautiful than I ever imagined a human could be. A faint smile tugs at my lips at the thought of the many tiny spots of pigmentation that dot her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. They are a rather charming feature; one I've not seen on any of my kin before.

My vision of Ella standing before me, reciting the ancient vows of the bonding ceremony, replays in my mind. It troubles me because it does not make sense. Her people have been enemies of our kingdom for many years.

With a heavy sigh, I ready myself for the day and then leave my room. While I cannot deny that I am drawn to Ella, I could never bond with a human. It is dangerous enough that I am Dark Fae. There is no way I could ever bind myself to a woman who does not even possess any light magic to combat and balance my darkness.

Shaking my head to clear my errant thoughts, I make my way to the palace gardens, searching for Oradon. He was not in his chambers, and I know he spends much time out here, tending herbs for his formulas and potions.

I must speak with him about his visions. Oradon said he saw starlight in my future. Ella's name means *starlight* in the ancient tongue of my people. It cannot be a coincidence that I met her last night. I suspect he knows more than he has told me.

As I traverse the winding paths, my gaze drifts over the many flowers that line the walkway. Although my people possess wings and often fly from place to place, areas such as these are meant to be enjoyed from the ground. There is something calming and almost meditative about wandering through this space.

The palace gardens are thick with vegetation. The bushes and plants are overflowing with vibrant, blooming flowers in various colors of red, blues and purples. Long trailing vines hang over the thick walls, swaying in the breeze like living curtains.

It is lovely here during the day, but I find it even more beautiful at night when the flowers and leaves light up in bioluminescent colorful displays. A cool breeze rushes through the gardens, carrying the rich scent of lavender that grows nearby. The fragrance reminds me of the vision of Ella and I performing the ancient bonding ceremony in a field full of lavender.

Perhaps it is the approach of my mating cycle that caused me to have such a strange vision. Maybe it is a compulsion of my biology to imagine myself already mated to another, even though she is human. After all, she is female first and foremost, and my kind once bonded with hers before the last Great War.

I pass by the large crystal fountain in the center of the gardens and marvel at its beauty as I always

do. The sunlight reflects off the crystalline surface, casting brilliant, colorful bursts of light throughout the space. Water spills over the three levels before feeding into a small pool at the base. Several streams branch off and wind their way along the many paths and walkways.

My grandfather commissioned this as a gift to my grandmother. She died a few years ago, and he has sat out here every day since, grieving her loss. I'm not surprised when I round the corner and find him seated on a carved wooden bench across from Oradon. They often spend time here together, reminiscing days that have long since passed.

I am stunned to find my father here, however. He is usually in his throne room during this hour, conferring on affairs of state.

I have not spoken to him since he left last night, upset with me. My first inclination is to turn around before he notices my presence, but I'm too late. My grandfather calls out.

"Ryvan?"

I spin back to face him. "Grandfather, it is good to see you."

"Come," he says. "Sit down beside me. It is fortunate you are here. Something happened last night that we must discuss."

With difficulty, I manage to suppress a sigh of frustration. Of course, my father told him about our argument. Now he plans to use my grandfather and Oradon to persuade me to see reason, hoping they will convince me to take a bondmate.

I take a seat beside my grandfather. He smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling. His hair is still dark and lustrous, and he does not appear old, per se, but he is no longer youthful, either.

I worry for him. It has been two years since my grandmother passed, and I know he misses her terribly. It is not uncommon for our people to die prematurely due to a broken heart, and his increasingly frail appearance with each passing day has not escaped my notice.

As if he has read my thoughts, he sighs heavily as his gaze turns to the fountain. "This was your grandmother's favorite spot in the gardens."

"I remember," I reply.

My father's stern voice draws my attention. "I came back to speak with you last night, but you were gone."

"I went out to the forest."

He narrows his eyes. "You know it is dangerous to wander the woods during the silver moon cycle. Did you perchance happen to stumble upon a human?"

My heart stops. He knows about Ella. "I…"

I stop abruptly with my mouth hanging open, uncertain of what to say. How can I explain this? My father hates humans, especially after what happened to my mother.

"The humans sent someone to the barrier last night." He cocks his head to the side. "Did you by chance see them?"

I'm not sure if his question is a trap. If he's asking me this, surely he already knows the answer.

Swallowing thickly, I draw in a deep and steeling breath, meaning to explain why I did not turn Ella in for breaking through the veil.

Before I can begin, he says, "The King of Eryadon sent a messenger. The humans are asking for our help to slay a dragon in their kingdom."

My head jerks back even as relief moves through me. He is not speaking of Ella, then.

He continues. "You've heard of the damage wrought by the dragon in Solwyck."

I nod. Who hasn't heard of it? Princess Halla managed to slay the beast, but at great cost to herself. Solwyck lies along the coastline, and the merfolk claim to have witnessed her bravery. They

also say that she may never walk again.

Father casts a worried glance at me. "The human kingdom of Eryadon has a dragon problem, as well. They normally appease him with an annual maiden sacrifice, but recently, one of the maidens escaped to her village. Angered, the dragon returned to reclaim her, raining down fire and destruction before taking her away again." He scowls. "The humans are concerned he will do more damage and are asking for our help to destroy him."

My mouth drifts open. Dragons are dangerous, powerful beings—foes to Fae and Elvenkind for thousands of years. "What are you going to do?"

"Of course, we will not help the humans," he snaps. "They are our enemies. They killed your mother. I detest all their kind."

I should have suspected as much. Even though the men who murdered her were not soldiers of Eryadon, Father holds all humans responsible for Mother's death. It is why he ordered his mages to strengthen the veil. To protect us from any outside invasion.

His gaze shifts to Oradon. "What does your magic tell you of the future? Will we have to deal with this dragon or will he merely be a problem for the humans?"

Oradon closes his eyes, conjuring his magic to read what he can. After a moment, he lifts his head. Immediately, he turns to me. "The dragon will come to Anara."

Father's eyes widen, as do mine. "When?"

"Soon," Oradon replies.

"We must ready the guards," Father snaps. "Station them along the barrier to be on the lookout for the dragon's approach."

Oradon frowns. "I do not believe he will come with the intent to destroy us. No, he will come to ask a favor."

Father scoffs. "And what favor would a dragon ask of the Fae? Their kind is too haughty to plead for any sort of help."

"Even so," Oradon presses. "That is what my magic is telling me." His eyes sweep to mine. "In turn, he will grant a favor for you, my prince."

Father's brows shoot up to his forehead, his shock mirroring mine. "What would a dragon want with Ryvan?"

Oradon shakes his head. "That I cannot foresee. I only know that it will happen."

Father's worry is written across his features. "You are not to leave the castle. Do you understand?"

Panic fills me. If he confines me here, there is no way I can meet Ella at the barrier. It would ruin all my plans. "No."

"Your safety cannot be risked, Ryvan." His wings flutter in agitation.

"You cannot force me to stay in the castle."

His expression turns thunderous. "That is an order from your father *and* your king."

Anger burns through my veins, sparking a darkness deep within. Magic, raw and powerful, courses through my body, crackling between the tips of my fingers like lightning. Father's eyes widen as they drop to my hands, and I notice Oradon's do the same.

"Ryvan," my grandfather warns, holding his hands out to me. "You must be careful, my dear boy. You can control it. I know you can."

Curling my hands into fists at my side, my arms tremble as I struggle to contain the power within. I draw in several deep breaths, forcing it back down and locking it away.

My grandfather's eyes are heavy on me, his expression full of pity. His brother was born Dark

Fae and he was killed because of it. It is the law. No Dark Fae should be allowed to live.

Father's eyes meet mine. "You cannot allow your emotions to control you, else you will be unable to control the darkness within, my son."

With a slight clench of my jaw, I lower my gaze. Does he think I do not know this? I have struggled my entire life to hide what I am—to keep it buried so deeply within me, praying it will never break free.

Dark Fae are powerful. The last Dark Fae King—Erebyr—nearly destroyed Anara with his warring. The power inside him drove him mad. He killed his family and set fire to half the land, including his own villages and people, to drive our enemies away.

He may have saved Anara from invasion, but at a cost greater than many were willing to pay. His was a dark and terrible reign that nearly destroyed our kingdom and our people. He is the reason why all Dark Fae are now put to death immediately upon discovery.

The first time a Dark Fae's powers manifest is also supposed to be the last. They are to be executed instantly.

Grandfather and Father were the first to find me the day my mother was killed. If my father had cared for his kingdom more than he loved his family, he would have followed the ancient laws and executed me right then and there. Sometimes, I wonder if he would have been wiser to do so. Instead, we've kept this secret in our family all this time, and I fear it will eventually escape us if I ever take a mate.

In his gaze I can see my reflection and the fire that sparks behind my eyes as I struggle to control the darkness within. "I doubt even a dragon could harm me, Father. Can you not see what your son is capable of?"

All the color drains from his face as his gaze travels over me. In his eyes, I recognize the same fear I saw the night he found me standing protectively over the body of my mother.

A shadow passes overhead, and I lift my gaze to find one of the guards flying straight toward us. He lands before my father and bows low. "My King, Lord Fenlyr is here to speak with you."

Father's expression returns to his normally stoic mask. "Inform him that I will be there shortly." As soon as the guard leaves, he turns to me. "We will talk later."

As I watch him fly back to the castle, dark memories fill my mind.

When the enemy soldiers stormed the castle and took Mother's life, that was the day we all learned the truth of what I was. She died trying to protect me and Eryl.

Rage roared through me, and I turned it on the men who took her life. I set fire to our enemies, burning them to ash for what they'd done. Even now, the raw and primal magic courses through me. It is ever-present just beneath the surface, always clawing to break free. It is the dark secret that I must keep at all costs.

Capable of terrible and destructive magic, I am among the cursed, one of only a handful born in a thousand years. My father should have put me to death when he discovered what I was. It was his duty as king, and he failed.

I am Dark Fae, and as such, I am the greatest threat to our people and our kingdom.

CHAPTER 7

ELLA

As I make my way through the forest, I cannot stop thinking of Ryvan. I'm anxious to see him again tonight. I keep trying to convince myself that I'm only excited about the spells I will learn, but in truth, I know it is more than that.

I'm attracted to him. With his dark hair, glowing green eyes, and pointed ears, he is ethereally handsome in a way that human men are not. He is kind, too. Something I had not expected from a Fae.

A squirrel chitters at me from a nearby branch, interrupting my thoughts. He's probably upset that I'm too close to his tree.

"I'm sorry, little one," I call out to him. "I mean you no harm."

He stops a moment, cocking his head to the side to regard me before he chitters again and then returns to his home in the tree. I wonder, if I could understand him, what he is saying. I've heard the Fae and the Elves speak to animals, though that may be simply rumor as well.

A smile quirks my lips as I remember Ryvan's shocked expression when I told him I would not bargain away myself or my firstborn child to make a deal with him. He was completely aghast. I'm curious what else I do not know about him and his people. I've only ever heard rumors and second-hand tales all my life.

Just when I fear I may be lost, I notice the light glow of the veil in the distance—the part that is still intact, anyway. I follow along the barrier until I see the chimney stack of the cottage up ahead.

When I first found it not long ago, I dreamed of hiding out here away from my stepmother. But her magic would surely have led her to me. She has chased down many a servant that has tried to escape her before.

I'm not sure how long it's been here, but it looks to have stood abandoned for many years. I've often wondered who may have once lived in this place.

The structure is made of stacked gray stone that looks as though it may collapse if challenged by a strong wind. The roof is poorly thatched from years of abandon and neglect. Even so, there is something charming about it, and I imagine it must have been very cozy before it fell into disrepair.

I'm surprised to notice smoke rising from the chimney. As I draw closer, I notice a white horse standing just outside the front door. It turns to me and neighs, then gestures with its head toward the cottage as if trying to communicate that I should go inside.

"Are you trying to tell me that Ryvan is in there?" I smile at the horse, wondering if I am crazy for even entertaining such an absurd thought.

"She is," Ryvan replies, slightly startling me as he steps out of the cottage. He gestures to the horse. "This is Mirna. She has been my friend for many years."

I blink at him. "Are you really able to communicate with her?"

His brows pinch together. "Out of all the stories you must have heard of my people, you've never heard of this?"

"I… thought it was merely rumor, like the things we discussed before."

The horse neighs loudly, lifting her head.

Ryvan laughs and turns to me. "She's laughing. I told her about the firstborn child you expected me to ask for when we made the terms of our agreement."

I narrow my eyes, feigning annoyance, but I cannot stop the slow smile that curves my mouth. "So, you two are making fun of me now?"

A smirk twists his lips. “Of course not.”

I move closer to the horse, resting a hand atop her neck and gently combing my fingers through her soft mane as I whisper in her ear. “Did you know that he made a deal with me to keep women from swarming him at the ball because he believes he is so handsome they will not be able to resist his charms?” I pause. “Has he always been this full of himself?”

The horse neighs even louder, stomping her hoof as if highly amused.

Ryvan arches a brow and gestures to his pointy ears. “My hearing is quite acute, you know.”

“Well?” I cross my arms over my chest. “What was her reply to my question?”

His gaze shifts to the horse, but he does not answer.

Mirna nods her head up and down, and I laugh.

He gives her a pointed look. “You and *I* will have a discussion later, Mirna.”

She stomps her front hoof and neighs even louder as if laughing at him.

Tipping his chin up, he ignores her and gestures to the cottage. “Shall we go inside for our lessons? I’ve started a fire so it should be quite warm by now.”

I nod and follow him across the threshold.

As soon as we step inside, I’m surprised by how warm it is in here. The cottage consists of one large room with dirt floors, but it is rather comfortable in here compared to outside.

He leads me to the only furniture left in the space—a wooden table with four chairs.

He drops a satchel onto the seat beside him and pulls out a book, a bottle, two glasses, and a folded cloth with cheese and crackers.

“What is all that?” I eye it curiously.

“This is a spellbook of basic defense magic—and something to eat and drink while we work. But first, I must create an object for you to use in place of blood.”

“What do you mean?”

“The spell you used to bring down the veil required blood. That is how a Blood Witch wields her powers—with an offering of herself. If you do not wish to have to injure yourself each time you want to do magic, you will need an energizing object.”

I frown. “Is that how your kind use magic?”

“No, we are inherently born with it.”

My thoughts turn to the single leaf he gave me to use to mend the torn page. “The leaf… that’s why you gave it to me, isn’t it? Otherwise, I would have had to use blood again for the spell to work.”

He nods and then holds his upturned palms out to me. “Give me your hands.”

I place my hands in his, and I’m surprised by how smooth his skin is. It makes me embarrassed for I know my palms are rough and calloused from all the hard work I do during the day. “What do we do now?”

“Close your eyes and quiet your mind.”

I do as he says. Warmth travels across my palms from our joined hands. It moves up my arms, across my shoulders and into my chest. I gasp as delicious heat fills my entire body.

“Open your eyes,” he whispers.

His gaze holds mine and I stare transfixed as his normally glowing green eyes swirl with black. He turns my palms up in his hands, gently rubbing the soft pad of his thumb across my skin.

My mouth drifts open as an orb of white light hovers over each palm. Gently, he brings my hands together, combining them into one. The soft glow dims and then turns into a smooth white stone.

He clasps his free hand over mine, curling my fingers over the strange item. He lifts his gaze to me. “This energy is now tied to you and may be used by no other. If its power wanes, it may be

recharged under the light of the moon."

I open my hand and study it. Somehow, I understand that in creating this object, Ryvan has placed a great trust in me. I meet his eyes evenly. "Thank you."

He dips his chin in a subtle acknowledgement.

"Now," he says. "Let us begin."

As we go through the spells, Ryvan seems surprised by how quickly I'm able to pick up the basics.

He points to one of the glasses on the table before us. With a slight motion of his hand, he gestures to the goblet and it rises, hovering above the surface a moment before he gently sets it back down.

He looks to me. "I want you to do this with the other glass."

I swallow nervously as I focus on it. The stone is warm in my other palm as I use my free hand to try to conjure the spell.

I stare at it for what feels like forever, willing it to move, but it will not. With a heavy sigh I lower my head. "I cannot do it."

"Give me the stone."

I hand it over, upset at myself for failing.

He stands from his chair and moves behind me. He's so close the heat of his body radiates to mine. Awareness prickles my skin as he gently gathers my long chestnut hair in his hands and sweeps it over my shoulder.

"This should help you, Ella." He reaches around me and holds out the stone. It's wrapped in tiny spiraling threads of silver and suspended from a chain. I smile as I realize he has somehow made it into a necklace.

"This should help you," he offers as he fastens the clasp behind my neck.

My heart flutters as his hands settle gently on my shoulders and he whispers in my ear. "Focus on the glass. I know you can do this."

Warmth spreads through my hands as tiny sparks of energy flit across the tips of my fingers. My arms tremble as the magic moves through me. Softly, I bite my lower lip and concentrate on the glass.

Shakily, it lifts from the table and hovers in the air a moment before I carefully set it back down.

"It worked." I turn my head to look back up at Ryvan and find his green eyes already staring down at me. "I cannot believe I actually did it."

He flashes a devastatingly handsome smile. "I knew you could, Ella."

I start to stand but a sudden wave of dizziness washes over me, and I stumble forward.

Ryvan catches me in his arms before I hit the floor.

"What's wrong with me?"

He gently brushes the hair back from my face as his eyes search mine in concern. "Forgive me, Ella. I pushed you too far, too quickly. Your kind are not used to wielding magic. I did not realize it would have this effect on you."

He reaches for one of the glasses and brings it to my lips. "Drink this."

I take a few sips, but when he tries to offer me some of the food, my stomach twists, and I turn my head away. "I cannot. Not right now."

It's warm in here, but suddenly it feels too closed in. "I need some fresh air. Can you help me go outside?"

I expect him to simply provide an arm for me to lean on, but instead he sweeps me completely off my feet, lifting me to his chest as if I weigh nothing.

I blink up at him. "You are going to hurt yourself carrying me, Ryvan. I can walk."

“Hurt myself?” he laughs. “My people are much stronger than yours. Your weight is very slight, Ella. You are hardly a burden.”

Heat flushes my cheeks as his masculine scent—something akin to earth and cinnamon—surrounds me.

He carries me outside the cottage. Mirna neighs as soon as she sees us.

“It is all right,” he tells her. “She simply used up too much of her energy casting spells. She will recover.”

“How long do you think it will take? I must return before sunrise.”

“At most, a few hours,” he reassures me. “Would you prefer to sit or lay down?”

“Lay down.”

He gently sets us down in the thick grass. “You can lay on my wing.”

“I will not break it?” I ask, worried.

He shakes his head. “I know the clear panes make them appear fragile, but our wings are very sturdy. Trust me.”

Cautiously, I lay back on his wing beside him. I trace my hands along the surface, marveling at the strange, leathery texture. They appear like dragonfly wings but much larger. When he curls the edge of his wing around me, I smile. “I had no idea you could move your wings in this way.”

“Are you warm enough?” he asks.

I scoot a bit closer to him, and then nod. It feels good to be nestled against him, partly wrapped in his wing as we stare up at the night sky.

CHAPTER 8

RYVAN

As we lay in the grass, I notice the light of many stars through a clear space in the canopy above us. "I have heard rumors that your people are stargazers like mine. Is this correct?"

"Yes." A wistful smile curves her lips. "My parents used to lay out a blanket, and we'd gaze up at the stars. They would teach me all about the constellations."

"You speak of your parents in the past tense."

Her expression falls. "They died when I was little."

She does not tell me how her parents died, and I do not ask. Instead, I offer her the only thing I can—the Fae shared words of mourning. "My heart grieves with yours."

"Thank you," she whispers, her eyes bright with tears. "Do you still have your parents?"

I close my eyes briefly against the painful memory. "I still have my father, but my mother died when I was a child."

Ella's warm hand takes mine, squeezing gently. "My heart grieves with yours."

As we turn our gaze back to the night sky, I note that the silence between us is neither awkward nor uncomfortable.

She makes no move to pull her hand away from mine, and I am glad. After a moment, I lift my free hand and point to a cluster of stars in the northern sky. "You see that constellation there?"

She shakes her head and scoots closer to me, so close that her delicate scent—something akin to strawberries and sunshine—fills my nostrils. The warmth of her body radiates to mine. My heart begins hammering. "Where?"

"Right there." I point, and she moves even closer. She turns her head toward me, the warm mint of her breath fanning across my face with the cool night breeze.

"I see it now," she replies with a smile that stops my heart momentarily.

I have heard that humans possess inferior night vision. Staring at her in the darkness, I am glad she is unable to see me as clearly as I can see her. The tips of my ears and my cheeks flush with warmth, and I know they have probably turned a light shade of green.

I am completely and utterly captivated by her luminous blue eyes. They remind me of the sky on a clear summer day, and I could so easily lose myself in her gaze.

"You are not what I expected," she whispers.

Her eyes stare deep into my own. The vision of her standing across from me, reciting the ancient vows of bonding, replays in my head. I lower my gaze. She can never be mine. I am dangerous—especially to her.

I clear my throat and then decide to tease her. "Yes, I remember you expected me to take your firstborn child."

Mirna snickers, and Ella laughs, the sound light and beautiful. She is captivating in a way that I thought only Fae and Elvenkind could ever be, and I am completely enchanted.

We continue to stare up at the stars, and I point out the constellations as they are known to my people, while she shares what they mean to hers. I'm astounded that two different cultures can study the same sky and see something so vastly different. Yet, how strange that either of our people even bothered to look up at all.

"Do you think all cultures observe the stars?"

"Yes," she answers without hesitation.

I study her curiously. “Why do you say this?”

“I think it’s the nature of our existence… the core truth in all of us.”

I tip my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“We are constantly reaching for that which is just out of reach. We strive to make sense of the mysterious by searching for patterns in the sky and giving names to things we do not truly understand.” She pauses. “Perhaps that’s why there are rumors about names having power. To name something is to claim it—to make it ours.”

I am completely and utterly spellbound by her words. Her mind is fascinating.

A lovely smile graces her lips as she continues. “We search the stars for patterns and name the constellations. Then we try to interpret their meaning when we are the ones who assigned them in the first place.”

To listen to her speak is to see the world through a different lens. She is as captivating as she is beautiful, and I find myself completely enthralled by her words.

As the night wears on, we talk of many things. Her mind is fascinating—a complex and unsolvable puzzle. Where I see structures and patterns, she sees beauty and mystery.

The tales she has heard of my people make me laugh, but some give me pause.

“I’ve always been told to avoid wandering the forest during the silver moon cycle,” she says. “There are stories about humans being captivated by and spirited away by the Fae. That is why I was so scared when I first saw you. I thought that’s what you meant to do when you approached me.”

I look to her. “It is forbidden for us to do this anymore.”

She turns on her side, propping herself up on one elbow as she studies me. “It’s true, then?”

I nod. “Many of our people have human ancestry.”

She blinks. “What about the wild hunt? It is said that Fae and Elves used to hunt our kind beneath the Hunter’s moon. Is that true as well?”

The wild hunt. She has heard it is a night when otherworldly beings prey upon humans, but this is not so.

I meet her eyes evenly. “It is not what you have heard. It is an ancient practice, still kept by the Elves. After the ceremony of bonding, the male chases his mate through the forest. When he catches her, they seal their bond beneath the stars. It is how they honor their connection to the gods of nature and ask for their blessings upon the marriage in return.”

“Oh,” she replies, her cheeks flushing with color. She lowers her gaze and nervously tucks a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. “The Fae no longer do this.”

Although she says this as a statement, I understand it is a question as well.

“Some still do. But most simply have an outdoor bonding ceremony.” I pause. “What about humans?”

As I listen to her speak of the traditions of her people, a cool breeze moves through the forest, and I curl my wing tighter around her to keep her warm. I’m surprised and humbled by how much trust she already places in me.

The light of the silver moon casts an ethereal glow upon her pale skin. As my gaze travels over her face, a pink bloom spreads across her cheeks. Her perfect, full lips draw my attention. Errantly, I wonder if they are as soft as I imagine. I fist my hands at my sides so I am not tempted to run my fingers through the long, silken strands of her hair, pulling her to me and tasting of her lips.

When she falls asleep, I lie silently beside her, studying her delicate features as she rests. I admire the curved shell of her ear where a Fae’s would be pointed, the softly rounded curve of her brow, and the many spots that span the bridge of her nose and cheeks.

She curls her body into mine and places her small hand on my chest. Lightly, I rest my hand over hers, imagining her standing before me as we recite the ancient vows of bonding.

My grandfather always told me that the moment he met my grandmother, his soul recognized hers. I'd always believed that his memory of their meeting had been shaped by their many years together. But as I stare at Ella, I understand now that he was speaking truth.

As she nestles against me, my fangs instinctively extend into sharpened points with want to claim her as mine. I'm startled by how much emotion I already have for her. With a slight clench of my jaw, I force myself to look away from her sleeping form.

I do not realize how much time has gone by until the early light of dawn begins to glow on the horizon. Gently, I call her name to wake her. "Ella."

Her eyelids flutter open, and she gives me a sleepy smile. "What time is it?"

"I do not know. I only know that the sun is already—"

She jerks up, her eyes wide as she scans the forest. "Oh, my gods! I have to get home! If I don't have breakfast ready, she'll be upset!"

Ella jumps to her feet and starts for the woods. She calls over her shoulder, "I'll see you tonight?"

"Yes," I reply, my gaze locked on her retreating form. I wish she did not have to leave. "I will be here."

CHAPTER 9

RYVAN

Although it has only been a week that I have been meeting with Ella, I find myself already dreading the day when she will leave for Arnafell. As I make my way through the gardens to find Oradon, my thoughts keep returning to what he said about my future: Starlight and the Silver Moon. I must speak with him… find out exactly what he has seen in his visions.

I've always suspected he sees much more than he admits. I have never outwardly accused him of this, but I will today. I must know what he sees in my future concerning Ella. I did not intend to become so close to a human, but I cannot undo what is already done. And now I must know if there is even the slightest of hope that my vision of her will come to pass.

As I round the corner, I find Oradon sitting with my father and grandfather near the crystal fountain.

While I would not mind finding Oradon with my grandfather, my father is an entirely different matter. His insistence that I take a bondmate is now a constant and uncomfortable source of tension between us.

Father's gaze shifts immediately to me as I approach. "I have been looking for you."

I remain silent, bracing myself for the inevitable lecture I'm certain is to come.

He continues. "Lord Fenlyr has presented an offer of betrothal to you for his daughter's hand."

I frown. "I will not agree to it."

He arches a brow. "His daughter's light magic is powerful. Many say Lorala is one of the strongest wielders among us. She is your childhood friend, and I believe she would be a good match for you," he remarks calmly. "A *safe* one, even, my son."

I clench my jaw. I understand what he is saying. If her light magic is strong, she would be a good counterbalance for my dark magic. After all, in the olden days before Dark Fae were put to death, they would choose bondmates who could safely help them to control their powers in this way. Even so, I cannot, in good conscience, bind myself to her. "I will not bond with her, Father. I cannot. Do you not see that it would be wrong to inflict my darkness—my burden—upon another?"

Father's eyes are full of pity as he places his hands on my shoulders. "You must have a mate to balance your darkness, Ryvan. Do you not realize that is the reason I am trying to find someone for you?"

I blink across at him, stunned.

His gaze darts to Oradon and then back to me. "After we discovered what you were. Do you remember when I took you to Oradon and asked him to read you?"

I nod. I remember that day well.

Father continues. "He discovered that you were the strongest of any Dark Fae that has come before. You must have someone to balance your dark magic or else it will consume you, my son. And I—" his voice catches. "I already lost your mother and I refuse to lose you as well."

His gaze holds mine before he speaks. "I have a meeting with the High Council. I ask that you consider my words."

Before I can respond, he turns and flies away, leaving me alone with Oradon and my grandfather.

Oradon casts a knowing glance in my direction. "I assume you originally came here to find me?"

As usual, he is correct, only reaffirming my belief that he sees and knows more than he claims.

"I—" I stop when I remember my grandfather is still here, and I'm not sure how much to reveal in

front of him. He and my father are close. While they do not share everything, this is one secret I cannot risk reaching my father's ears.

As if sensing my hesitation, my grandfather places a hand on my shoulder, then stands. "I can sense you need to speak with your mentor alone."

"Grandfather, I—"

His eyes shine with kindness. "It is all right, my dear boy. I have other matters to attend to today. We will speak later."

Without waiting for me to reply, he extends his wings and takes flight. I lament once more how frail he seems. Like dry parchment that could tear apart in the slightest breeze. He appears old beyond his two hundred years lately. The loss of my grandmother has aged him, as I've heard can happen to those of my kin who lose their bondmate much sooner than expected.

Once he's gone, I turn to Oradon. "I have met someone."

His eyes widen. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Ella," I reply, not bothering to mention she is human.

His mouth drifts open. "Starlight," he breathes.

"When I touched her, something strange happened."

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I… had a vision of us performing the bonding ceremony. Like a flash of memory, but it cannot be, because this has not happened."

"Yet," Oradon adds.

I cock my head to the side. "What are you not telling me?"

"When I search the future, I only see one path of many." His brows knit together. "It does not always mean you will choose this path. Each choice we make affects the ones that follow. You come to me for guidance, but you must understand that *you* determine the course of your life. Not everything can be left up to fate."

Frustration burns through me at his words. "There is something I must know, Oradon, and I cannot afford for you to answer me with your riddles."

"I do not do this on purpose, my prince. I cannot dictate to you the course you should take. I can only offer guidance based on what I see. No more and no less."

"There you go again calling me by my title instead of my name because you know that what you tell me is not what I wish to hear." I lean forward and then meet his gaze evenly. "Please, Oradon, I must know: Will I follow the same path as the Dark Fae King Erebyr? His actions caused the death of his bondmate and his family. I… cannot bear the thought of—"

He places a hand on my shoulder as his blue eyes search mine. "Do you feel as though you are capable of such a thing?"

"No," I reply without hesitation. "I could never do this."

A faint smile tugs at his mouth. "Then, you have your answer, Ryvan."

I understand that his words are meant to reassure me, but they do not. "And what does Ella have to do with all of this?" I ask. "I met her after you divined my future. Starlight and the silver moon… just as you mentioned. It cannot be coincidence."

"You are right. It is not. But now you must decide what to do with the threads fate has presented to you."

With a heavy sigh, I lift my gaze to the sky. Once more, my search for guidance only leads to more questions. It is many more hours until nightfall, but I am eager for it to arrive. For with it, I hope will come the answers that I seek.

CHAPTER 10

ELLA

As I make my way through the forest to the cottage and the veil up ahead, I am eager to see Ryvan. Although it was not very long ago that we met, it feels as if I've known him forever. Every night we've been practicing magic, but he insists that we must also practice dancing soon.

He says it's imperative that I learn it well, since I've agreed to monopolize his time the entire night of the Silver Moon Ball so that no other women will be able to dance with him.

I huff out a laugh as I remember him mentioning the "swarm" of women he expects will be there to seek his hand. While I do not disagree that he is handsome, it's amusing to know he thinks so highly of himself. Then again, I've heard that most men are this way.

When I reach the cottage, I notice Mirna already waiting outside. She lifts her head in greeting as I make my way toward her. Resting a hand atop her neck, I gently run my fingers through her soft mane. I smile and hold out the apple I've brought her from the garden.

"Hello, Mirna. It's lovely to see you again."

She leans her head against me, neighing softly before taking the fruit from my hand.

"Stop trying to bribe Mirna into liking you more than me," Ryvan teases as he walks up beside me.

I laugh softly. "I do not have to bribe her. I *am* much more likeable than you." I glance at the horse. "Don't you agree, Mirna?"

Mirna neighs and lifts her head in an approximation of a nod.

Ryvan narrows his eyes at her, but he cannot hide the slight grin that tilts his lips. "I'll remember this, Mirna."

He gestures to the cottage. "Shall we?"

I grin, and follow him inside.

Thoughtful as ever, Ryvan already has a fire lit in the hearth. Despite the fact that this place is abandoned, it does hold the heat from the fireplace rather well.

Ryvan opens his satchel on the seat beside him and pulls out the spellbook, a bottle, two glasses, and a folded cloth with cheese and crackers. "I've brought something new."

"What is it?"

"Here," he says as he pours me a glass of red liquid instead of our usual water. "I believe you will like this."

I lift it to my nose, sniffing. It smells of fresh berries with a hint of citrus. "This smells wonderful. What is it?"

"It is a drink made from kali fruit. It is in season now and quite delicious."

I bring the cup to my lips and take a tentative sip. A low moan of pleasure escapes me as the sweet, citrusy flavor rolls across my tongue. When I'm finished with the first glass, I pour myself another.

As we go through the spells, Ryvan praises me when I lift the bottle using magic to pour myself another glass. When he turns to me and smiles, my gaze travels over his face and his perfect, full lips.

My mind floats in a bliss-filled haze, and I lean closer, completely transfixed as I study his features intently.

He arches a brow. "What are you doing?"

I reach out and touch his face, tracing my fingers lightly over his mouth. His lips are soft and warm, just as I imagined. “Your lips are… perfect,” I whisper.

His cheeks and the tips of his ears turn a light shade of green. “What are you—”

“You’re changing colors, Ryvan.” I laugh softly. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

His skin turns an even darker shade.

I raise both hands and cup his face, awestruck as I stare deep into his glowing green eyes. “You are so beautiful.”

He frowns. “Not exactly the words a male wants to hear from a female.”

“Handsome, then?” I ask. Softly biting my lower lip, I trail my hands down his neck to his broad, muscular shoulders. “You’re so strong, too.”

His brow furrows deeply. “Are you all right?”

His question confuses me. I’ve never felt better. I smile brightly at him. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

I slide my hands further down his body, tracing my fingers over the hard planes of muscle that line his chest and abdomen. I lean in, breathing deeply of his warm, masculine scent of earth and cinnamon.

CHAPTER 11

RYVAN

She emits a low appreciative hum as she leans in close to my neck and inhales deeply. "You smell so good," she whispers against my skin.

Something is definitely wrong with Ella.

She traces her delicate fingers over the pointed tips of my ears and a small shiver of pleasure runs through me.

I wrap one hand around her wrists and pull them away from me. "Are you all right?"

She nods, but I notice her cheeks are flushed a deep shade of red. I place the back of my other hand on her forehead, wondering if perhaps she has a fever. "Do you feel warm?"

When I touch her cheek, she leans into my palm as if relishing my touch.

"Ella, I think something is wrong. I—"

I gasp as she crawls into my lap. Softly biting her lower lip, she stares at me through half-lidded eyes, full of desire. "I think I want to kiss you, Ryvan."

My eyes go wide. *What is going on?*

My gaze lands on her empty glass and realization dawns. "Ella, I think the juice affects your people differently than it does mine."

My heart hammers in my chest as she cups my cheek and leans in. Her lips are so close to my own that the soft mint of her breath fans across my skin.

"How so?" She skims the tip of her nose lightly alongside mine.

I draw in a shaking breath as I fight the urge to press my lips to hers. I want so much to kiss her and taste the warmth of her mouth. I long to run my hands over her body, tracing every line and soft curve of her form.

I study her beautiful face and the many small spots that span the bridge of her nose and cheeks. I want to count each one and memorize the patterns of her petal-soft skin.

I reach for her; the tips of my fingers graze softly over her cheek. Her blue eyes stare deep into mine.

With a slight clench of my jaw, I force myself to look away. This is wrong. I should not touch her. She is not herself.

I grab her wrist, pulling her hand away while attempting to move out from under her. She only tightens her hold on me. I try to stand but she clings to me and I lose my balance. We fall to the floor.

She crawls over me and gently nuzzles my neck. "You smell so good, Ryvan. Like earth and cinnamon."

A throaty hum escapes her, and I gasp when she licks my skin.

"Ella, you must stop," I rasp as the words leave my mouth without any real conviction. My body responds instinctively to her touch as intense need burns through me.

She runs her hands over my chest and abdomen as if exploring my body. The scent of her need calls to the darkest, most primitive part of me, and my stav extends, hard and painfully erect against the confinement of my pants.

She dips her fingers beneath the hem of my shirt and traces them across my bare skin. Her touch is fire, and my control begins to crumble. I must put a stop to this at once.

I roll her onto her back, pinning her beneath me. A sharp huff of air escapes my mouth as she arches up into me, her center pressed firmly against my hardened stav.

“Ella,” I barely manage. “We must stop.”

She lifts her head and licks my neck again. My body instinctively responds and my fangs extend with want to claim her.

Her eyes widen and she inhales sharply. “Ryvan?”

I push away and turn from her, ashamed of my reaction. Her small hand alights on my back. “Ryvan?”

Drawing in a deep breath, I force my fangs to retract. Slowly, I turn to face her.

She smiles and crawls toward me, wrapping her arms around me and burrowing into my chest. “There you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you were a monster for a moment, but it was just a bad dream.”

Monster. The word hits me like a physical blow. I hate that the appearance of my fangs scared her.

She pushes me onto my back and lies down next to me.

I sigh heavily in frustration, struggling to push down my desire as she snuggles into my side. She is obviously drunk from the kali juice and I cannot just leave her here like this.

She nestles closer into me and closes her eyes.

She shivers slightly and I wrap my arms and wings around her to keep her warm. This is going to be a very long night.

CHAPTER 12

ELLA

As my mind slowly returns to awareness, I realize I'm snuggled against something solid and warm. I nestle further into the heat, breathing deeply of the warm, cinnamon, earthy scent.

The aroma triggers a memory, and my eyes snap open. My head is buried in Ryvan's chest, and my arms and legs tangled with his. I lift my head and roll away. I sit up and then groan as a dull headache pounds at my temples. I drop my head into my hands. "Oh gods, what happened?"

"It seems kali juice affects humans like wine," Ryvan answers.

Bits of memory flit through my mind, along with the achingly vivid image of me licking Ryvan's neck.

I turn to him, my eyes wide. "Oh, dear gods. I licked you."

"Yes, I thought that was interesting." A hint of amusement laces his tone as he arches a brow. "It seems that you find me irresistibly attractive."

I scoff and roll my eyes, but the slight motion only makes my head spin worse. I bring my knees to my chest, resting my forehead against them. "I feel terrible."

Ryvan places a hand on my shoulder. "Forgive me. I did not know this would happen. I will simply bring water in the future."

My mind still floats in a slight haze, so before I can stop myself, I reach across and touch his lips, lifting them to view his left canine.

He inhales sharply, and I jerk my hand away. "Sorry. I—I'm still not thinking clearly." I frown, then demand, "Do you by any chance have fangs?"

He swallows thickly. "Yes."

My eyes widen. "Were you tempted to eat me?"

A surprised laugh escapes his lips. "No." He clears his throat, struggling to keep a straight face. "Fae do not eat humans."

"Then what *was* that?"

His expression falls into one I recognize as embarrassment. "When you were…"

"Intoxicated and clinging to you?" I finish his sentence, cringing inwardly as I remember crawling into his lap.

"Yes. As you so plainly put it." He tips his chin up, attempting to appear unfazed despite the light green coloring of his cheeks and the tips of his ears. "My body responded to your… advances and triggered the instinct to… mark you."

"Mark me?"

"Yes. We mark our mates during the first… mating."

"Oh," is all I say, unsure of how to respond.

Only now do I realize just how badly tonight could have gone. I remember clearly now how Ryvan kept pushing me away and trying to save me from making any mistakes I'd likely regret when I sobered.

I take his hand, and his eyes snap up to mine with a question. "Thank you, Ryvan."

He frowns. "For what?"

"You could have taken advantage of me, but you didn't."

His brow furrows. "You do not have to thank me, Ella. I would never do that to someone. Nor would any decent person."

I turn my gaze to the window, noting it's dark outside. "It's still nighttime?" I ask.

He nods.

"How long was I asleep?"

"At least four hours, although it felt like an eternity."

I give him a puzzled look.

"It was bad enough that you were clinging to me like a norelian sloth." He smirks. "But the incessant snoring in my ear made it difficult for me to get any sleep for myself."

My jaw drops and I stare at him in horror. "I do *not* snore."

"Is that so?" He arches a teasing brow. "Let's ask Mirna, shall we? Your snoring was so loud, she came into the cottage to check on us because she wasn't sure what all the terrible noise was."

"You're lying," I reply, completely mortified.

"I wish I was. I fear my sensitive hearing may never recover, thanks to you."

I playfully hit at his shoulder. "Well, you have no one to thank for that but yourself. *You* were the one who brought the drink."

"Trust me." He laughs. "I will make certain to never bring it again."

I inhale sharply when I notice the soft light peeking in through the cottage window behind him. "I have to go."

He blinks. "But the sun is only just now beginning to rise."

I rush toward the door, calling over my shoulder. "You don't understand. I have several chores to take care of before I have to serve breakfast." I pause as I step outside and look back at him. "Will I see you again tonight?"

He nods and I rush toward the forest.

CHAPTER 13

RYVAN

I watch her retreating form as she races back to her home, and I worry for her once more. Witches can be dangerous creatures. And although she obviously feels secure enough to return to the witch without fear of being harmed, I am still concerned.

My thoughts return to the memory of her body pressed against mine. Ella is beautiful. I loved the way her half-lidded blue eyes searched mine as she touched my face. Closing my eyes, I imagine pressing my lips to hers.

Shaking my head, I push the errant thoughts aside. I should not be thinking of her like this. She is human. Besides that, she does not possess innate light magic. She could never balance the darkness inside me, and I would always be a danger to her.

Yet, even so, I cannot stop thinking of her. I stare up at the silver moon and the many stars that dot the night sky.

"Starlight," I whisper as her image fills my mind.

CHAPTER 14

ELLA

The entire day passes rather quickly. I'm so lost in thought as I prepare dinner for my stepmother that I almost don't hear the chime of the door.

Brushing the flour off my hands onto my apron, I twist my hair into a tight bun, so that I don't appear too disheveled, and rush to answer.

As soon as I open the door, dread fills me when I find Mr. Malforn standing on the other side. He's dressed in a fine, tailored coat and pants. He looms over me, his mouth spread in an overly wide grin as his gaze rakes over my form.

Remembering how he tried to touch me last time, I wrap my shawl tightly around my shoulders. The material is thin from years of use and does nothing to shield me from the cold, but at least it will cover me a bit from his lustful gaze. "Why are you here? Our wedding is not for another—"

He cuts me off. "Can a man not come to visit his future bride simply because he wishes to see her?"

My nose wrinkles as he speaks, his breath reeking of alcohol as he eyes me lasciviously.

My stepmother comes up behind me. "Mr. Malforn, what are you doing here?"

He steps forward, but stumbles slightly propping himself up on the doorframe before moving inside. "I'd like to see what I'm buying now."

She darts a confused glance at me. "Ella is standing before you."

"Without the clothes," Malforn says.

My stepmother nods, and before I can respond, she waves her hand, slamming me against the wall. I whimper as I struggle against the heavy force of her magic holding me in place.

I gasp in horror when she snaps her fingers and my dress falls from my body, leaving me in only my undergarments. Malforn steps close, the stink of his heavy cologne and the alcohol on his breath clogging my nostrils as he leans in.

"Do not touch me!" I hiss.

A smirk twists his lips as he grips my chin firmly, forcing my eyes to his. "When we are wed, you will not deny me." He curls his hand around my throat, squeezing so tight I can barely breathe. "Do you understand?"

I barely manage to nod as a tear slips down my cheek.

He relinquishes his grip and turns back to my stepmother. "See that she is ready when I come for her in a week."

He leaves, and she releases the spell.

I crumple to the floor. I claw at my clothing, holding the fabric around my bare body as I race out the door and into the gardens, where I quickly redress. Tears stream down my face as I run for the woods, desperate to get as far away from Malforn and my stepmother as possible.

Although night has already fallen, the world is much darker beneath the thick canopy of trees. Patches of moonlight filter in through the branches, providing just enough light to guide me toward the barrier.

Before long, I notice the glow of the veil ahead. When I reach the felled trunk beside the cottage, I sit on the hard wood and drop my gaze to the ground still in shock over what happened. I lift my trembling hands out, curling them into fists and pressing them into my lap as I try to still their shaking. A tear slips down my cheek as I choke on a sob.

Of all the ordeals my stepmother has subjected me to, this was the most terrifying. When she pinned me to the wall for Malforn, I was completely at their mercy. He could have done anything he wished to me—and so could she.

A broken sob escapes me as the dark memory floods my mind. I cannot meet Ryvan like this. I don't want him to see me crying. I stand, meaning to leave, when I hear someone approach.

CHAPTER 15

RYVAN

It's a bit earlier than it was last night when I met Ella, but we did not agree on a time to meet again, and I do not want her to wait long. Besides, I am eager to know that she is well. I could not sleep for worry after what happened between us last night. What if she lied, and she is afraid of me? After all, she called me a monster after she saw my fangs fully extended.

At my insistence, Mirna trots quickly but stealthily from the stables. *"Are we traveling to the veil again? To meet the girl?"* Her voice echoes in my mind.

"Yes."

"What you do is dangerous, you know."

I purse my lips at her chastising. *"I am well aware."*

"Your father dislikes humans."

I run a hand through her lovely, long, white mane. *"And what do you think?"*

She falls silent as if considering. After a moment, she replies, *"I like her. She is funny. And… you seem to be fond of her, as well."*

I tense. *"Are you trying to cause trouble?"*

"Did I strike a nerve?"

I do not answer. The truth is, she did. I *am* falling in love with Ella. Moreover, I feel that affection deep in my soul.

As we draw closer to the veil, my nostrils flare when a saline scent permeates the air. I narrow my eyes as they sweep over the forest.

Ahead, I notice Ella sitting on the felled trunk. Her shoulders shake with heaving sobs. My heart clenches at the sight. Quickly, I dismount and make my way toward her. She stands and turns as if to leave.

"Ella, wait!" I call out. She stops, not bothering to turn around. "Where are you going? I thought you wished to—"

"I should not have come." Her voice quavers. "Just tell me what night the Silver Moon Ball occurs, and I'll return then."

Her answer puzzles me. "Did you not wish to learn more spells? I thought—"

"Are they strong enough to defend against a witch?"

I clench my jaw. "No. They are basic defense spells against… lesser adversaries."

"Then they will do me no good."

Only now do I notice her body is trembling. I move toward her and gently touch her forearm. She jerks away as if my touch were fire.

"Ella, I will not harm you. My vow. I merely wish to know what is wrong. What has upset you so?"

"I—" Her voice breaks as she lowers her head. The strong saline scent fills the air once more, and I circle back to face her. She lifts her gaze to mine, her eyes filled with tears. Her face is puffy, and her eyelids are swollen and red. Cautiously, I reach out and touch her cheek, brushing away her tears with the soft pad of my thumb.

"When is the Silver Moon Ball?" she asks, her voice quavering slightly.

I'm confused. Why is she asking me this? "Ella, what—"

"How many days from now?" she cuts me off abruptly.

"It falls directly in the middle of the silver moon cycle. A little less than a fortnight."

"Then I will return on that night."

Only now do my eyes notice the light bruising on her neck in the shape of a hand.

She starts to turn away, but I gently take her hand in mine. "What happened to your neck? Please, Ella. Tell me what is wrong. Who did this to you?"

She lowers her gaze. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Was it the witch?"

She shakes her head. "My stepmother did not do this."

I still, shocked by her statement. "Your *stepmother* is the witch?"

"Yes. My father married her about a year after my mother's death. I… do not think he knew what she was when they met. She hid her goblin form, and by the time he found out it was too late. She had already enchanted him." She pauses. "And when he died, she turned me into a servant."

I clench my jaw as my gaze travels once more over the bruising on her neck. "If she did not do this to you, who did?"

"The man she has sold me to—the one I'm to marry."

Fierce possessiveness, followed quickly by anger, rushes through me. "Who is he? Give me his name."

"Malforn," she replies.

Curling my hands into fists, I commit his name to memory. I will end him for daring to harm her.

Her gaze drops to my fists. "It's all right, Ryvan. I'll be gone long before he returns to collect me for our wedding. The Silver Moon Ball is fast approaching, and afterward, you will help me to escape."

Her words fill me with guilt. I am a selfish male to put her health and safety below mine. I shake my head. "No. You do not have to wait until the ball. I will find another way to get you to Arnafell… or somewhere else. Anywhere else. I will not risk you being harmed again by a monster."

"But what about my part of the bargain?"

"It does not matter. I would not see you harmed just to wait out the terms of our agreement."

She cups my cheek. "I will be fine, Ryvan. In less than a fortnight, I'll be on a ship bound for Arnafell and you'll be as you wish—without a wife."

I sigh heavily. "I may be forced to marry whether I want to or not."

"Come with me… on the ship." Her eyes search mine. "We can run away together."

It is a lovely dream and my first inclination is to agree, but then I realize that I cannot. I am heir to the kingdom of Anara, but Ella does not know this. I've never told her exactly who I am. To her, I am simply Ryvan.

"I wish I could, Ella, but I cannot leave my family. My father, brother, and my grandfather would all be devastated if I left them."

"I suppose if I still had my parents, I would feel the same. I do not blame you, Ryvan. You are blessed to still have a family."

It's on the tip of my tongue to offer her a place in the castle, but what could I truly promise her? Father hates humans. He would never agree to allow one to stay with us. "Yes, I am."

She gives me a warm smile. "Let us talk of other things."

Reluctantly, I nod.

"I think we should practice our dancing." She grins. "Especially if you do not want me to cause us to trip while we're out on the floor."

A soft laugh escapes me. "That would be quite a sight indeed."

CHAPTER 16

ELLA

Although I have not known him long, it feels as if I've known Ryvan forever. I am comfortable with him in and way that I have never been with anyone else. He is kind and thoughtful and… so different from what I'd originally thought he would be. It seems the Fae are far from tricksters like I'd heard, but one thing still rings true.

His people are completely and utterly captivating in every sense of the word.

He bows before me and extends his hand. I take it in mine, and he pulls me toward him. He curls his arm around my waist, carefully resting his palm against the small of my back while his other hand holds mine. We're so close that his warm breath whispers across my face as I meet his glowing green eyes.

He arches a brow. "You are supposed to place your free hand on my shoulder, Ella."

"Oh," I reply. Completely flustered, I do as he asks. My cheeks heat as he pulls me even closer until there is barely any space between us.

"Now." He smiles. "Follow my lead."

I've never danced before. So, when he starts moving, I try my best to follow but end up tripping repeatedly over his feet and apologizing profusely.

He stops and tips his chin down until his gaze is level with mine. "How about we try this another way?"

"What would you suggest?"

"Stand on my feet so you can get a sense of the movements."

My mouth drops. "You want me to stand on your feet?" I glance down at the ground then back up at him. "Will that not hurt you?"

"I've told you before. Your fear is unfounded, Ella. My people are much stronger than yours." As if to demonstrate his point, he circles his hands around my waist and lifts me as if I weigh nothing. I laugh while he spins me around a few times before setting me back on my feet.

He grins, and I roll my eyes. "All right. I get your point. But still"—I slip off my shoes—"I don't want these soles to bruise you."

"Very thoughtful of you." He chuckles.

Carefully, I step onto his feet, and he begins to dance. We whirl and move in a complicated pattern as he holds me tightly to him.

He arches a brow. "Do you think you have it now?"

I laugh. "No, Ryvan. I'm afraid you've got a poor partner. I'll never be able to do this properly before the ball."

He tightens his grip on my body and my hand. "Then, do you believe you will be able to hold on?"

"Hold… on?"

Without answering, he picks up his pace, swirling and spinning as he holds me tightly, pulling me so close that my chest is pressed against his. His masculine scent surrounds me. My heart hammers, and his beats against mine in almost perfect synchrony.

He smiles as we dance. Even though I'm merely standing on his feet while he moves, I am breathless, and I cannot stop smiling back at him.

CHAPTER 17

A pink flush spreads from her neck to her cheeks and the tips of her ears, lending a lovely, ethereal glow to her beautiful skin. The moonlight reflects in her sky-blue eyes as she watches me, and a stunning smile curves her lips.

"What do you think of dancing now, Ella?" I grin because her smile is contagious.

"I love it," she replies breathlessly.

As we continue to move, her long silken hair spills out of the twisted knot atop her head. A few stray tendrils framing her lovely heart-shaped face. She is so beautiful my heart physically aches just from staring at her.

When we are finished, she sits on the nearby fallen trunk. Her chest rises and falls as she catches her breath, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "That was wonderful, Ryvan."

I bend over to retrieve her discarded shoes, then drop to one knee before her. "May I?"

She lifts her foot toward me. I take her calf in one hand while I gently slip her shoe on with the other, marveling at how soft and smooth her skin is and how small her feet are. I do the same with the other shoe, suddenly realizing how worn and tattered they appear.

"Do you not have any better shoes to traipse through the woods?"

I realize I've said something wrong when she jerks her feet back and drops her gaze to the ground. "These are the only pair I have."

"Forgive me." I cup her chin and tilt her head back up to me. "I did not mean to judge you."

"It's all right." She shrugs. A faint smile crests her lips. "When I get to Arnafell, I'll find myself a job straight away and make some money to buy new ones."

My heart stutters and stops at the mention of her leaving. I dread the day she must go.

"What's wrong, Ryvan?"

Her question catches me off guard. "I… worry for you," I admit.

"Why?"

"Because you will be alone in Arnafell."

She sighs. "I know. It will be strange. I've never had a"—she pauses for a moment as if searching for the right word before finally settling on—"*friend* before. I will miss you, Ryvan."

"I will miss you, too," I say solemnly.

Silence lies heavily between us for a second before she stands with a composed smile. "In the meantime, though, I look forward to meeting you again tomorrow."

I dip my chin in a subtle nod. "Likewise."

I watch her retreating form as she makes her way back through the forest. Each time I must watch her leave is becoming more difficult, knowing that every day brings a future without her so much closer.

As I make my way back to the castle, thoughts of Ella fill my mind. I want her, but I know it cannot be. Even if I were not Dark Fae, my father would never accept a human as my bondmate.

I walk through the palace gardens and notice a lone figure seated on a bench near the crystal fountain. It is late, and I wonder who it is. Cautiously, I approach and soon recognize my grandfather.

"Grandfather? What are you doing here?"

He turns to me, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "Ah. Ryvan. Just the person I was looking for."

I tip my head to the side. "You were looking for me?"

"Yes. It seems you've been returning late these past few weeks."

I still.

"Which can only mean one thing." He places a hand on my shoulder. "Who is she?"

My mouth drifts open. He knows, but how? I did not think anyone was aware of my nighttime ventures. I have been careful to only leave on horseback instead of flying where I may be seen and I always return to my chambers before the rest of the household awakens.

"Well?" he presses.

"Her name is… Ella."

His brows rise thoughtfully, and he lifts his gaze briefly to the sky. "Starlight," he comments. "What a lovely name. Why do you not bring her to meet us?"

My shoulders sag in relief. He does not know she's human, and I must keep it that way.

"Her family is…"

"Not wealthy?" he asks, finishing my sentence for me.

I nod, hating that I am withholding the truth from him.

"There are worse things, you know?" he tells me gently.

I frown. Little does he know that *it is* worse. She is human, and as such, considered an enemy of our kingdom.

"As you know, your grandmother was the daughter of King Mydian of Cyridil."

"I remember. Your betrothal and bonding united our two kingdoms under one banner."

"Yes, but we were not betrothed."

My head jerks back. "What? I thought your father arranged the marriage to forge an alliance."

He shakes his head. "My dear boy, that is the story he told after the fact, but that is not the truth. Not at all."

Now I'm extremely curious. "Then tell me. I wish to know what actually happened."

He turns his gaze to the crystal fountain, and a wistful smile crests his lips as if reliving a memory. "I fell in love with your grandmother when we were only eighteen. She attended the failed peace talks with her father. The moment I met her, I knew… there was something about her that told me that she was the one." He pauses. "She felt the same. We asked our parents for their blessing, and they refused."

"So, what did you do?"

"I went to a shoemaker who specialized in magical shoes."

My brow furrows. "Magical shoes?"

"Actually, they were slippers made of pure crystal. They allowed one to easily cross the veiled barrier." My jaw drops as he continues. "I found out your grandmother was to be married to the Elven Prince of Rivenyl to keep the peace between their kingdoms, while my father arranged for me to marry a daughter of one of the Fae High Lords." He gives me a knowing look. "My mating cycle was approaching, and I had to be paired soon, but I did not want anyone but your grandmother. So, I sent the slippers to her and asked her to meet me at the veil."

"How? How did you get them to her in the first place?"

"I had the help of a dragon."

I blink at him in shock. "But… they are enemies of our kind."

"Not all," he explains. "Yes, they are destructive, but some merely seek gold and other valuables, as this particular dragon did. So, I offered him gold in exchange for passing through the barrier and smuggling her the slippers. As you know, the veil cannot contain their kind because their magic is strong, and their tough scales protect their passage."

I wait with bated breath for him to continue.

"So, he delivered the magic slippers to her, along with a note to meet me in the forest near the barrier. As soon as she stepped through, I sealed her to me in the woods, beneath the stars."

My eyes widen. "That's… more than I needed to know."

He chuckles. "You asked."

A curious thought occurs to me. "The slippers. How do they work, exactly?"

"They allow the wearer to cross the veil's magic without difficulty. Much like dragons do."

I lower my gaze to the ground in contemplation. Such items would be dangerous if they fell into the wrong hands.

Grandfather lifts his hands. Swirling tendrils of magic make their way to the fountain. I watch in wonder as a glowing orb appears in the center. It floats toward us, carrying a pair of crystal slippers inside it.

Grandfather takes them and hands them to me. "Here, my boy. These are the glass slippers I gave to your grandmother. The reason she was able to cross the veil and return to me."

I eye him curiously. "And why are you giving them to me now?"

His eyes flash with a hint of mischief. "I suspect you will need them."

"How did you know?" I ask, staring at him in astonishment. "How did you find out that I—"

He raises his hands in a silent bid to allow him to speak. "I see more than you realize, Ryvan."

I open my mouth, bursting to share the truth, but he stops me.

"I do not want to know anymore. Our people used to bond with humans many years ago before the great rift between our people. If you are courting one while the veil is thin, it is none of my business. Besides, maybe such a pairing might lead to peace between our kingdoms." He pauses. "Your father has blamed them for your mother's death for far too long. Not all humans are bad."

"Why do you say this?"

A faint smile crests his lips. "My aunt was human. She met my uncle at the veil during a silver moon cycle—when the barrier was weak."

My brow furrows. "You never spoke of her before. Why?"

With a slight clench of his jaw, he lowers his gaze. "Because it is painful to think of them now. They died during a great plague when I was a child."

His eyes shine with tears as they meet mine. "I simply want you to be happy. If you are secretly courting a human, I do not want to know the details. If your father knew I was encouraging your clandestine outings, he would not leave me alone until he discovered the truth. You know he can ferret out a secret like no one else." He narrows his eyes. "The only reason he has not discovered that you go missing at night is that he is so worried about the dragon in Eryadon that he cannot think of anything else. He has been worried for you ever since Oradon said the dragon was tied to your fate."

"He should know by now that he need not worry so for me," I reply bitterly. "I am Dark Fae. The dark destructiveness of my magic can protect me from almost anything."

He nods, but says nothing. What can he say?

I hold the glass slippers out to him. "I will not need these."

He arches a brow.

I continue. "As a Dark Fae it is already dangerous enough to consider bonding to one of our own people. I could never bind myself to someone who lacked innate magic. It would be too dangerous for her."

His eyes shine with pity as he pushes them back into my hands. "You must trust yourself, Ryvan. There were Dark Fae long before King Erebyr. Many of them lived normal lives side by side with the

Light Fae. My brother's powers were strong, but he managed to contain them. He—" his voice catches a moment before he continues. "I know if he had been given a chance to live… he would have been able to control the darkness within him. Just as I know that you will be able to do this too."

Grandfather rarely speaks of his brother because the memory of his death is too painful for him, even now… all these many years later.

I meet his gaze evenly. "Thank you for your faith in me. You have always believed in me, Grandfather."

"And I always will, Ryvan." He glances down at the glass slippers. "Now take these and know that if you decide to use them, you do so with my blessing."

CHAPTER 18

ELLA

As I stand on the pedestal with my arms out to my sides, I gaze in the mirror at my reflection. The material for my wedding gown is lovely. I wish it were for a marriage I actually wished for, instead of the one that has been arranged for me.

Malforn sent the most skilled seamstress in town and requested the finest fabric for my dress. I do not believe he's acting out of kindness, merely a desire to display his wealth. According to my stepmother, he has already invited most of the wealthy and prosperous families in our area to attend.

Closing my eyes, I imagine myself walking down the aisle to meet someone else—Ryvan. Ours would be an outdoor event, though, I believe. The Fae keep a close relationship to nature, and I can imagine standing on a hill surrounded by a flowering field full of lavender.

A wistful smile crests my lips.

"Imagining the big day, my lady?" the seamstress asks, snapping my attention back to the present.

"Something like that," I reply.

"He must be a good man, your future husband," she adds. "He sent for this material from the Elven kingdom of Rivenyl. It is the finest silk I've ever worked with."

If only she knew the true nature of the man who would be my husband. Then again, I suppose no one knows except me and my stepmother.

I sigh heavily as my thoughts turn again to Ryvan. He does not want a wife. That's why he made a deal with me. I help him avoid marriage and, as it turns out, he helps me avoid one, too.

My stepmother's reflection in the mirror behind me draws my attention. Her gaze travels over my form. "You look… presentable."

I'm not sure how to respond. "Thank you, Stepmother."

She moves to my side and motions for the seamstress to leave us. The woman bows then retreats immediately from the room.

She eyes me intensely. "We must do something about your back."

"My… back?"

I glance at the three-way mirror and notice the many scars that crisscross my back in thick, red lines. "What can we—"

She waves her hand and flicks her wrist toward me.

Pain rips across my flesh like fire, dropping me to my knees. Overwhelming agony sweeps across my skin as if dozens of blades are tearing through my back. I fall to the ground, writhing. I open my mouth but cannot make a sound. My eyes fly open to find my stepmother standing over me, her hands moving back and forth as she assaults me with her magic.

After what feels like an eternity, she finally releases me. I lie on the floor, panting and hugging my knees to my chest, still unable to speak or even make any sound.

She snaps her fingers, and a small whimper escapes my lips as my shoulders shake with violent sobs. "I could not have you screaming and scaring everyone, now could I?" she asks. "But I've fixed your back. Your scars are all mended."

I track her as she moves to the door, turning back to me just before she heads into the hallway. "Make sure you change out of that dress before you leave. The seamstress still has to make her adjustments."

As soon as she is gone, I struggle to blink back my tears to no avail. They stream down my face,

and I cannot stop crying. Everything hurts, and my flesh feels as if it's on fire.

Despite my pain, I force myself to stand. The loosely pinned fabric slips from my shoulders to pool at my feet. I manage to pull my plain dress over my body and step into the hallway. The seamstress is waiting outside on a chair with her hands folded neatly in her lap.

"Do you have all you need for my measurements?" I ask.

"I can finish the dress in a few days." She smiles politely. "You will have it before your wedding. I promise."

I dip my chin and continue. I'm already finished with my chores for the day. At dinnertime, my stepmother's eyes never leave me, though I do my best to pretend I do not notice. I clear the table and take the dishes to the sink when I feel something move behind me.

"Ella." Her voice is cold as ice. "Follow me."

Fear coils tightly in my chest. That command is never a good sign; it usually means I've missed a spot in my cleaning, and I'm about to pay heavily for the mistake. However, she only recently removed the scars from my back with her magic. Why would she mark my flesh again? Her magic is not without limits, and I know she needs some time to recharge after she uses it.

She leads me down the spiraling staircase to the basement. With a flick of her wrists, she lights the many sconces along the wall to illuminate our path down the narrow hallway. When we reach the door to her study, she turns to me with a piercing gaze.

Panic trickles down my spine, though I try to keep it off my face. I follow her inside and notice the spellbook lain out on her worktable, the pages open to the one I tore out.

My heart stops, then begins hammering.

"Has anyone else been down here?" she asks.

"No."

She waves her hand toward me, and a strong wind gusts, slamming me back against the wall. She curls her fingers, and I feel an answering grip around my waist, holding me in place. Long tendrils of magic uncoil from her palms and rush toward me, encircling my throat so tightly that I worry I will not be able to breathe.

"This is a truth spell." She flashes a sinister grin. "I will know if you are lying."

Panic rushes through me. *She knows*.

"Someone has been down here, Ella. They dripped candlewax on one of my spells." She points to the spot where I dripped wax when I mended the torn page. She casts a suspicious glance at me. "Do you know if anyone else has been down here besides me and you?"

"No, Stepmother."

She narrows her eyes. "Did you allow anyone to enter the estate without my knowledge?"

"No, Stepmother."

My heart hammers in my chest. If she asks if it was me, I will have no choice but to tell her. Magic will compel me, no matter how much I might wish to lie.

"Do you know anyone who would want this spell to cross the veil?"

Fear spikes through me and I struggle to clamp my mouth shut. Her dark magic forces my lips apart, and before I can stop myself, the words spill from my mouth. "*I* want to cross the veil."

"Why?"

"To escape you and my upcoming marriage."

My pulse pounds in my ears. She'll know now that it was me.

An evil cackle escapes her. "Of course, you would wish for your freedom. But that will never happen, Ella." Her sharp gaze rakes over my form. "You ungrateful thing. I have taken care of you all

your life after your father died, and this is how you repay me? With the wish to escape?"

"Yes," I reply, unable to stop myself.

She raises her hand, curling her fingers as if they were claws before she slashes the air in front of her.

Searing pain tears through my back, and a feral cry of pain rips from my throat as her magic cuts through my skin like sharpened blades. My vision darkens after her second lash. Liquid warmth blooms across my back as the scent of iron fills the air, so thick I can taste it on my tongue.

Panting heavily, I grit my teeth against the agony.

She holds my gaze for a moment then turns away. Over her shoulder, she flicks her wrist, releasing me from her hold. I fall to the floor in a crumpled heap.

"Why?" I ask, tears blurring my vision.

An evil smirk twists her lips. "Do not worry. I will fix you again before the wedding."

Without another word, she walks away.

Finishing my chores for the day is agonizing, but I manage. I have before, and this time should be no different, yet somehow it is. I don't know why my pain seems amplified a hundred-fold. Perhaps it's because the old scars blunted some of the pain due to damaged nerves. But now that they've been repaired, everything feels new and so much more painful as a result.

I clean up the table and do the dishes. Then I make my way to the cleansing room. I fill the tub with a mixture of cold and hot water I've warmed on the stove to make the bath more bearable, then carefully allow myself to sink in.

The water helps, but not enough to dull the pain as much as I'd hoped.

A glance at the clock tells me I'm half an hour late in leaving to meet Ryvan. I get out of the tub and dry off. It is difficult to move or to even dress without pain. It's so terrible, I can barely stand it.

Quietly, I slip out the kitchen door toward the garden and then into the woods beyond.

My normally hurried steps are slowed by pain, but I grit my teeth and press forward. As I approach the barrier, I notice Ryvan sitting on the felled trunk with his back to me. A smile lights my face just seeing him. And for a moment, I can forget my pain.

A flick of his ear is quickly followed by his head back to face me. He greets me with a bright smile.

"I thought you might not come," he says, but in his eyes, I read a question.

"I…" I hesitate, not wanting to share what happened. What good would it do to tell him? Besides, I'd rather not dwell on it. Nervously, I tuck a stray tendril of hair behind my ear. "I fell behind on my chores, and it made me late to meet you."

He nods, then bows low as he extends one hand. "Shall we practice some more?"

I laugh softly. All our practicing involves me learning to balance on his feet and hanging onto him as he spins us in a dance. "Let me slip off my shoes first."

He waits while I carefully step onto his feet, placing one hand on his shoulder and the other in his. He wraps his free arm solidly around my back. He tugs me close, and I cry out as blinding pain arcs through me from the pressure against my injured flesh.

He releases me immediately, undisguised panic in his features. "What is wrong?"

I lower my gaze, struggling to blink back my tears, but it's no use. He looks down at his hand, and

so do I, inhaling sharply when I notice the blood that stains his palm.

"Ella, what is this?"

Before I can answer, he moves behind me and gasps. His voice is low with anger as he growls, "Who did this to you?"

CHAPTER 19

RYVAN

My nostrils flare as I notice the crisscross patterns of blood seeping through the fabric of her dress across her back. Shock gives way to murderous rage. "Who did this to you, Ella?"

"My stepmother."

The evil witch. Dread settles deep in my gut. It is already bad enough that she is bound in service to this creature, but now that I know she is being beaten, I cannot let her return to the witch. I must find a way to keep her safely away.

I circle back to face her. Her blue eyes swim with tears. "Please, Ella. I must see your wounds so I may tend them."

She nods.

Carefully, she unfastens the top of her dress, and the fabric falls from her shoulders. I remove my tunic and hand it to her so she may cover the front of her form as I assess the injuries on her back. My eyes widen at the slash marks marring her delicate skin and the layer of thick scars that have been repaired underneath—hidden by magic. I recognize this type of magic, for my grandmother was a healer. The spell is complex and incredibly painful for the subject.

The amount of reconstruction astounds me, for the faint outlines of the scars that remain are thick, jagged, deep, and many. "Ella?"

She lowers her head. "She said my skin needed to be unblemished for my future husband. So, she repaired my back this morning, only to—" Her voice breaks. "Only to reinjure me a few hours ago."

"Why did she do this?"

Ella turns her head back to me. "When I mended the torn page, I dripped wax on the spellbook. She thought I'd let someone in without telling her—but at least she does not suspect it was me. Still… she punished me because someone tampered with her book."

If the witch harms Ella simply for being a suspected accomplice to a thief, I can only imagine what she might do if she discovers the truth. "You cannot go back to her."

Her brow furrows. "I have to. If I don't, she'll come looking for me."

I take both her hands in mine. "No. Only two days are left until the ball. I will need help, but I believe I can make a spell strong enough to hide you here until then." I touch her face and gently brush the tears from her cheek with my thumbs. "If I could, I would get you on a ship bound for Arnafell now, but the ice has not yet melted on the northern passage for them to travel."

She leans into my touch. "I will not leave you before I hold up my end of the bargain, Ryvan."

"That no longer matters," I tell her. "Your safety is more important."

She takes my hands. "You are my friend, Ryvan. I will not abandon you."

Her tone contains such conviction despite all she has been through. My heart aches as I look at her. She is brave, kind, and beautiful. Even now, while she is in such pain, she still thinks of me.

The tears in her eyes call forth my protective instincts. Feeling bold, I press a tender kiss to the back of her hand. "Stay here, Ella. I will cast an enchantment to shield you. It will hold until I can take you to Luryndale to board the ship."

"You are certain?"

"I am," I tell her. I must be. I cannot take any chances with her safety. "Though I will need help. Someone else must cast with me to strengthen the spell to ensure you are hidden from the witch."

She grips my hands. “No. You cannot risk—”

“It is fine. I promise.” I stroke her cheek. “Do you trust me?”

Her luminous eyes stare into mine and I wait anxiously for her reply. “Yes.”

My heart clenches at how quickly she answers. She truly does trust me. “Then wait here. I will return shortly.”

I fly as fast as I can back to the castle and head straight for the one person I know I can trust to help me with anything. After all, have I not helped him many times before?

Tapping his door, I wait in the hallway for him to answer.

When the door opens, I’m speechless. Each short black hair on Eryl’s head seems to be sticking in a different direction, and his eyes are glazed and unfocused.

My gaze drops to the goblet of wine in his hand. I realize in dismay that he is completely and utterly drunk.

I rip the cup from his grasp and storm past him. “Why are you drunk?”

He follows me, stumbling over his feet and buzzing his wings rapidly to steadily remain upright. “Have you not heard?” he slurs. “Lady Mirela is betrothed.”

I roll my eyes. “You stopped courting her months ago.”

“I know, but what does that matter?” He wraps an arm around my shoulder and sags against me. “I might have loved her if given the chance.”

I blink at him in shock. “You love her?”

“No, but I—I could have.”

I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“She’s the most beautiful woman in all of Anara. I’d hoped to try to win her heart at the ball. Now… she is betrothed and I will never have the chance.” With a heavy sigh, he collapses back on his bed. “She may have been the one for me, Ryvan. But now, I’ll never know.”

“Eryl?” I lean over him, but he does not respond. “You are drunk and not making sense.”

I slap his cheek, and his eyes fly open for a moment before he rolls onto his side and drags the blanket over his shoulder. “Leave me alone. I am tired and wish to go to sleep.”

“I need your help.”

“With what? Can it not wait until morning? I feel sick.”

Heaving a sigh, I run a hand through my hair. “No, it cannot. I need you to help me hide someone.”

He jerks up in bed, blinking and dumbstruck, and instantly sobers. “Hide someone? What are you talking about?”

“Here.” I hand him a cup of cold tea that I suspect he made before he began drinking, expressly to chase the alcohol from his system. “Drink this, and I will take you to meet her.”

“Did you say ‘her’?” he asks incredulously. “You’re hiding a woman?”

I grip both his shoulders. “Yes. One more thing: She does not know I am the prince, and I want to keep it that way. I will tell her later.”

CHAPTER 20

ELLA

"A human!" A man's voice rings through the darkness. "You're hiding a human near the veil?"

"Calm down and lower your voice or someone may hear you," another man answers, and I immediately recognize it is Ryvan.

"But you cannot bring a human to the Silver Moon Ball. Everyone will—"

"I'm going to disguise her with an enchantment," Ryvan says, cutting him off.

In the moonlight, I can just make out two figures flying ahead. When they touch down before me, the man beside Ryvan stares at me as if he has seen a ghost. "You really are human, aren't you?" he whispers more to himself than to me.

Ryvan elbows him. "Stop being rude."

He winces, looking flustered. "Forgive me." He bows. "My name is Eryl. It is lovely to meet you."

"Ella," Ryvan says. "This is my younger brother."

I smile. "It's lovely to meet you, Eryl."

He blinks as his eyes travel over my face. "You are beautiful. I did not think humans could be so charming and—"

Ryvan elbows him again, casting an icy glare in his direction.

"You don't have to keep doing that, you know." Eryl rubs his side. "I was just making an observation."

Ryvan narrows his eyes. "Keep your observations to yourself."

Eryl huffs out an exasperated breath. "My head is still slightly swimming, you know." He turns to me. "I had meant to drink the night away, drowning my sorrows and such, but Ryvan interrupted, claiming he needs my help casting an enchantment to hide you away." He studies me curiously as he addresses his brother. "Who are we hiding her from exactly? Father?"

Ryvan shakes his head. "A witch."

His jaw drops, and he turns to me, his eyes wide. "A witch is searching for you? Why?"

"She's my stepmother," I explain. "She wants to marry me off to an evil man, but I want to escape instead."

"And… where would you be escaping to?" he asks.

"Ryvan has booked passage for me to Arnafell. After the ball."

He cocks his head to the side. "Why after the ball?"

"Because I'm going to be his date for the evening so that he does not have to choose a wife."

His mouth falls open. After a moment, he spins back to his brother. "Are you trying to kill our father? What do you think he's going to do if you bring a human to the—"

"Father will not find out she is human," Ryvan counters. "I am going to cast an enchantment to disguise her."

"Humans cannot cross into our kingdom undetected. They—"

He holds up a hand, silencing Eryl. "I have a plan. Now, are you going to help me cast this spell or not?"

"Fine. But if you get caught, I will deny that I ever knew anything about this."

Ryvan rolls his eyes. "You know as well as I do that Father can ferret out any secret."

I step between them. "I don't want either of you to get in trouble trying to help me. I can just return

to my stepmother. I do not think she will—"

"No," Ryvan declares. "You cannot. She already hurt you, and I will not allow her near you again."

Eryl blinks at me. "What did she do to you?"

Ryvan grabs his arm and pulls him around to look at my back. He gasps. "I—I am sorry. Please forgive me," he says. "I did not mean—"

I turn to face him. "It's all right."

"I can heal your wounds," he offers.

I shrink back, remembering how painful it was when my stepmother healed my old scars.

Eryl frowns, and holds out his hands. "I will not harm you. I swear. I merely want to help."

I cast a worried glance at Ryvan. "My stepmother healed my old scars earlier. The process was more painful than any lashes."

Eryl steps toward me, his green eyes holding mine. "Then she is not skilled in the art of healing." He places one hand on his chest. "I am, and I will not hurt you."

I glance at Ryvan once more, and he takes my hand. "My brother speaks the truth. He is an excellent healer. More skilled that I am in this art."

I turn back to Eryl and nod. "All right."

However, I do not let go of Ryvan's hand. I know that I should, but right now, I crave comfort more than propriety.

Eryl raises his hands, and blue-and-green glowing swirls of magic grow from his palms as he conjures his spell. He waves them gently across my back while I squeeze Ryvan's hand so tightly I wonder why he doesn't protest.

Instead, he places his other hand over our joined ones, trying to soothe me. "You are doing well. Eryl is almost done."

"He is?" I ask, surprised because I do not feel a thing.

"All finished," Eryl confirms, stepping back to my side. He bows. "Your skin is now completely healed."

"Thank you." I manage a tremulous smile as I push down my tears. "Both of you."

He nods and turns to Ryvan. "Shall we?"

Together, they raise their arms and begin speaking the words of an enchantment. Blue-and-red glowing mist swirls around their hands, growing and merging into a giant orb. Together, they cast their magic toward the sky, and it suspends above our heads, spreading in every direction and enveloping us and the cottage in a giant bubble. The mist fades into darkness as soon as it touches the ground.

Ryvan turns to me. "You are now hidden from her magic as long as you stay within the barriers."

"All right."

Eryl darts a glance at Ryvan then turns to me. "How exactly were you going to get to the ball without wings?"

"I—" I search Ryvan's face for an answer. "We had not discussed it yet."

Eryl shakes his head. "Then you are fortunate that I am here to help you both. Tomorrow, I will help you get ready and escort you to the ball."

Ryvan claps a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you."

Eryl sighs. "What would you do without me?" He dips his chin in a subtle bow. "I will return tomorrow."

He bows low and flies off, leaving Ryvan and me alone.

A cool breeze buffets the forest, and I wrap my arms around my form, trying my best not to shiver

pitifully. Ryvan removes his tunic and drapes it over my shoulders, wrapping the fabric around me while he gathers wood to start a fire.

He leads me into the cottage and guides me to sit before the fireplace. I watch as he stacks the wood. Just when I'm about to ask how he means to light it, he conjures a ball of flame in his palm with an incantation and directs it to the hearth.

I sit down beside him and offer him his tunic. "It's cold. You should put this back on."

He shakes his head. "No. I am fine."

"Are you sure?"

He nods.

Now that we have a fire, I'm able to see more clearly. The flames cast a warm glow over his bare chest. I knew he was strong, but now that he's only partially clothed, I'm surprised by how muscular he is. His shoulders are broad, and the thick cords of his muscles flex when he moves. He has not an ounce of fat on him.

"Ella?" he inquires, and I realize that I'm still staring at the planes of muscle composing his abdomen and chest.

I quickly avert my gaze. "Yes?"

"Would you like me to stay with you tonight?"

"Won't your father worry if you are gone for so long?"

He shrugs. "It is a risk, but I do not want to leave you here alone."

A smile quirks my lips. "I'll be fine, Ryvan. Really, I will. Besides"—I sigh heavily—"I need to get used to being on my own."

His expression falls. "Yes, I… suppose you do."

"Go on," I tell him. "It's all right. I will be fine."

He stands hesitantly. "You are certain?"

I give him my best reassuring grin. "Yes."

CHAPTER 21

RYVAN

With one final glance back at her, I bid her goodnight, then take off. As I fly through the forest, I cannot stop thinking of Ella, alone in the woods. I know she can take care of herself, and the combined magic of both myself and Eryl should keep her hidden, but I still worry for her.

I alight on my balcony and go straight to my bed. I collapse back onto the mattress and close my eyes as my thoughts turn again to Ella. She must fend for herself soon enough, but I can hardly bear the thought.

The other worry that keeps circling my mind is the fear that her stepmother will somehow find her, despite the concealment spell we've cast over her and the cottage. Witches can be powerful creatures and I do not know the extent of this one's abilities.

The image of the torn flesh of Ella's back flashes through my mind and that decides it. I cannot sleep and I do not wish to. Not without knowing for certain she is safe.

As quietly as I can, I take off from my balcony and head for the forest. I glance over my shoulder several times to make certain I have not been followed by a well-meaning guard watching out for my safety at the orders of my father.

Although I know it is not far, it feels like forever before I reach the cottage. When I open the door, I find Ella huddled before the fire and shivering. It is much later now than we normally stay out, and the temperature has dropped significantly. I knew humans were considered more fragile than Fae, but I'd never considered just how much.

She jerks upright, her eyes wide with fear as she turns to the door. She sighs heavily in relief when she realizes it is me.

"Thank goodness it's just you, Ryvan." She blinks several times. "What are you doing here? I thought you went home."

"I—" I open my mouth to tell her that I could not stand the thought of her here alone, but instead, I offer a half-truth. "I could not sleep."

"We can keep each other company, then." She smiles. "I cannot sleep either."

I move to her side and remove my tunic, draping it over her shoulders. I rub my hands over her shoulders and down her arms, trying to warm her. I'm pleased when she leans against me, nestling into my side. "I should have brought you a blanket," I lament, inwardly cursing myself for not thinking of this before I returned to her.

Her eyes travel over my form, half nude now that I am without my tunic. "You are not cold?"

I shake my head. "It seems my people are able to withstand variations in temperature a bit more than yours."

She laughs. "Fae are stronger than us, you can fly, you can see better in the dark, you have magic, and now I find out that you're half polar bear as well."

I arch a brow at her. "My people are in no way related to the bear shifters of the north, Ella."

She grins. "I was just teasing you. Besides, I suppose I'll be meeting some of those bear shifters soon when I go to Arnafell to start my new life."

Her new life. The thought fills me with sadness. I do not want her to leave. Especially not to Arnafell. Now that I know she does not handle cold well, the north is no place for her.

She looks to me. "The bear shifters… do you know much about them?"

"I've only met a few," I admit. "Their manners were… blunt, but they were honest people. Many of them take human mates. Or so I have heard."

Even as the words leave my mouth, bitter jealousy rises within me at the thoughts of her in the arms of another man—bear shifter or otherwise.

Without thinking, I wrap my wing possessively around her, tugging her even closer to my side.

"So warm," she murmurs as her fingers trace over the sail. "Your wings don't feel anything like I imagined they would."

Her statement makes me curious. "Is that bad?"

"No. They are strong and beautiful. The first time you wrapped them around me, I thought they would be rigid and… fragile because they are so similar to dragonfly wings. Instead, they have the consistency of leather."

"Our wings are very strong and flexible," I offer.

"And warm," she adds, resting her head on my shoulder. "Your brother is kind. I always wanted at least one sibling, but my parents never got another chance before my mother fell ill." A wistful smile crests her lips. "So, I've decided that when I marry, I would like a large family. At least four children."

A deep ache centers in my chest at the thought of her taking another mate. I cannot bear the thought of her being mother to children who are not also my own. "Four is… a rather large number, according to my kind."

She tips her head to the side to regard me. "Well, how many are normal for Fae families? How many children do you want?"

I stare deep into her sky-blue eyes. "As many as my bondmate will give me."

Her expression turns serious. "Ryvan, if you want a family someday, why not search for a mate at the ball like your father wishes? You never know… perhaps your fated soulmate might be there."

My heart constricts painfully in my chest. Ella is my soulmate. Of this, I am certain. However, I do not believe she feels the same for me. Besides, how can we be together? It is difficult enough that I am Fae and she is human, but I am not just Fae. I am Dark Fae.

Instead of telling her all this, however, I simply reply, "I do not want a bondmate. I value my freedom too much."

She lowers her gaze, and I recognize disappointment in her features, though I do not understand why.

"What is wrong?"

She tips her head back up to me. "Do you believe in fate?"

"Yes," I answer without hesitation. "Do your people believe in such things as well?"

"Some of us do. My mother did. She was a seer." She pauses. "She told me something before she died. It was about my future and I—"

She stops abruptly as if unsure she wishes to continue.

"What did she say?" I ask, curious to know.

"She told me that on the night of my twenty-third birthday, I should go to the veil. She said I would find my destiny there… deep in the forest." Her blue eyes meet mine. "That was the reason I went to the barrier the night that you found me, Ryvan." A faint smile curves her mouth as she gently takes my hand in hers. "I believe we were destined to meet."

My heart stops and then begins hammering as she stares up at me. I open my mouth to tell her about Oradon's reading, but she continues.

"Maybe my mother knew I'd find you in the woods, Ryvan. Perhaps she knew that—"

A high-pitched screech sounds outside the window, and I still.

"What is that?" Ella whispers.

My nostrils flare as I scent the air. The smell of death and decay is heavy just beyond the cottage walls. Panic fills me as I recognize immediately what it is. "A griffin."

She inhales sharply. "How do you know?"

A low growl rumbles my chest. "His scent."

Carefully unwrapping my wings from around her, I stand and move toward the door. "Stay here, Ella. Whatever happens, do not come outside."

She takes my hand. "Please, Ryvan. Do not go out there."

I meet her gaze evenly. "I will be fine. I promise. You must trust me, Ella."

"I have come for the girl," a low and menacing voice calls through the door. "Give her to me and I will leave you alone, Fae."

My pulse pounds in my ears. "And what if I refuse?"

"Then, I will kill you and take her anyway."

A low growl escapes my throat as I open the door. Magic sparks across the tips of my fingers like lightning as I stare down my enemy.

Griffins are as dangerous as they are powerful. Its body is that of a lion but several times larger. Sharp talons rake across the ground as it stalks toward me. With the head and wings of an eagle, it stares at me with a piercing gaze, studying me like a predator closing in on its prey. I glare at him as I bare my fangs. "Why are you here?"

"The witch sent me to retrieve what is hers. Her magic could not find the girl, but my sharp eyes were able to see through your pitiful Fae enchantments. Now. Give her to me."

Fierce protectiveness fills me; I will die before I let him touch her.

Violent, swirling energy threatens to consume me as I call forth the darkness that flows through my veins, conjuring the fire that burns deep in my soul.

The griffin's eyes go wide as the fire licks across my skin, surrounding me in a shield of blue flame. "You are Dark Fae," he breathes, only now realizing what it is that he has threatened.

Cold determination steels me as I summon the destructive power within. A glowing orb of fire grows between my palms, sparking with energy. My arms shake as I bend the darkness to my will. "I am your death," I grit through my teeth. "If you dare try to take her, I will end you."

A sharp inhalation of air behind me is Ella. I dare not turn back. I have seen my reflection when the darkness takes over. I am the monster of ancient Fae legend—the one that the humans have every right to fear. In my enemy's eyes, mine reflect back at me feral and black. A snarl twists my lips as my fangs and claws extend into sharpened points.

The griffin lowers his head as if readying to charge past me to Ella.

"Give her to me," he snarls. "Or face the wrath of the witch that summoned me."

"You will not live to tell her what you have found," I grind out. "Ella is mine and I will not allow you to touch her."

In a blur of movement, he rushes toward me.

Lighting fast, I release the full might of my power, sending an orb of dark magic racing toward him.

He releases a high-pitched screech as the flame explodes against his body, engulfing him in a brilliant display of blue fire.

He writhes on the ground for a moment before recovering. His eyes full of rage as he rushes me again. I call forth my dark magic and energy erupts from my palms like bolts of lightning.

He twists away at the last moment and it misses him entirely. His taloned feet claw at the ground as he races toward me. I conjure more fire, but before I can send it spiraling toward him, he lifts his front paw and rakes his claws across my chest.

Blinding pain rips through me and I stumble back as he charges again.

Ella jumps in front of me as if to shield me, but with one swipe of his paw, he knocks her back. She goes flying to the side, hitting a nearby tree with a sickening thud.

Anger floods my system as I summon the wind. It swirls around him in a maelstrom of destruction, catching his wings and ripping him from the ground. I conjure fire and send it spiraling toward him in a raging inferno.

He releases a terror-filled cry as it engulfs his body, burning through feathers and fur and charring his flesh. The sound echoes through the forest, sparking dark memories.

In the back of my mind, the screams of a dozen dying men join his. Closing my eyes, I remember the raw pain and anguish I felt as I stared down at my mother's body before unleashing the fury within.

An image of Ella surfaces in my thoughts. I have lost someone I love before, and I refuse to lose again. I will kill him for daring to harm her.

When the griffin finally stills, I gather my magic and then push him away, sending his body flying far from this place.

My limbs shake as I struggle to control the dark fire that still burns in my veins. I close my eyes, fighting against the madness that threatens to consume me. I curl my hands into fists, willing the magic within me to calm.

I pant heavily as the energy slowly ebbs from my body. When it is finally controlled and locked deep within, I turn to Ella and rush toward her.

I drop to my knees before her crumpled form and gather her in my arms. Her eyelids flutter open and closed as I run my hands over her form checking her for injury. "Ella!"

She reaches a trembling hand up to my bloodied chest where the griffin raked its talons across my skin. "Ryvan," she whispers. "You are hurt."

My heart clenches at her concern for me despite her own injuries. "I'm fine. What were you thinking, Ella?"

Her blue eyes search mine in concern. "I was afraid you would be hurt. I wanted to protect you."

"Protect me?" I stare down at her incredulously. "Did you not see what I am? I am a monster, Ella."

She shakes her head softly. "You're not a monster, Ryvan. You saved me."

I still at her words. "You are… not afraid of me?"

"Why would I be?"

"Because I am Dark Fae." I glance down at my palms, remembering the powerful energy that flowed through them. "You saw what I am capable of. The destructive and dark magic that I carry within me. I—"

"It's all right, Ryvan." She cups my cheek. "I would never fear you."

I search her eyes, unable to believe what I am hearing. But in their sky-blue depths, I see nothing but truth. She is not afraid of me. "You should," I say darkly. "I am dangerous."

Her warm hand takes mine. "Not to me."

I shake my head in disbelief. "You do not understand. This is why I do not want a bondmate. This is why I cannot marry. I am dangerous. My father thinks that I can control it. He stubbornly insists that I bind myself to someone despite what I am."

"But I *know* you, Ryvan." She gives me a faint smile. "You are good and kind and—"

"No," I state firmly. "You saw what I am and what I'm capable of. I am a monster."

She opens her mouth to protest, but I interrupt. "Be still. I must heal you, Ella."

Closing my eyes, I place one hand directly in the center of her chest and the other over her abdomen as I conjure the spell of healing. It is more difficult for me to heal than it is to destroy, but I bend the magic to my will and force it to do my bidding.

When I open my eyes, she stares up at me. "How do you feel?"

She smiles. "Better."

"Good. I will take you to Luryndale tonight and secure room and board for you there until you are able to board the ship bound for Arnafell."

"But the ball is tomorrow."

"I already told you. That no longer matters."

She squeezes my hand. "It matters to you. So, it matters to me." Her gaze holds mine intently. "I want to fulfill my end of the bargain. I am your friend, Ryvan. And I will help you."

I start to argue, but she places a finger to my lips, silencing me. "I will go with you to the ball and that's that."

Even though in my heart, I know I should refuse, I cannot. Once she leaves for Arnafell, I will never see her again. The thought it almost more than I can bear. I am weak and, despite knowing that it is safer for her to leave now, I cannot stand the idea of parting from her. "Fine," I tell her. "If that is what you wish."

She gives me a faint smile. "It is." She pauses. "I'm afraid I will not be able to keep you company much longer. I am tired."

"Then sleep, Ella."

When I try to stand, she grips my forearm. "Please, stay."

"You still want me to stay with you even after what you saw?"

She nods and lowers her gaze. "I know I will be on my own soon enough, but until then, I'd like to spend what little time I have left here with you." She touches my face. "You are my… friend and I will miss you when I am gone."

Sadness fills me. "I will miss you too."

"Will you stay?" she asks, her eyes searching mine.

"Yes."

She nestles against me. "Thank you, Ryvan."

Emotions lodge in my throat, but I somehow manage to speak around them as she lays so trustingly against me and closes her eyes. "Goodnight, Ella."

She risked her life for me this night and she does not fear my darkness. I have seen my appearance when I lose myself to the madness of my power. It is a fearsome sight to behold. Even my own father is unable to still the trembling of his form when he has witnessed it. And yet, Ella is unafraid. She trusts me even though she should not.

My heart clenches as I stare down at her sleeping form. Griffins are dangerous creatures. She could have been killed trying to save me. How is it that such a delicate and fragile human can be so brave where all others would cower? She may not be as strong as one of my people, but she has a heart of true bravery.

I listen as the sound of her breathing softens, and she drifts off to sleep. I send a silent prayer of thanks to the gods for sparing her this night, and then tighten my arms and wings around her. I wish that I could hold her like this forever.

CHAPTER 22

ELLA

I open my eyes to the early morning rays of the sun filtering in through the window of the cottage. I start to stretch, but something tightens around my waist.

I freeze and glance down. The moment I notice Ryvan's arm, I relax. His body is pressed against the length of my back. His wing is draped over me like a warm blanket, and I'm loath to move, but I know we must get up.

Carefully, I turn in his arms to face him. His eyes are still closed in sleep.

I take a moment to study him, reaching up to gently trace the sharp line of his brow and the pointed tip of his left ear. A low, rumbling purr begins in his chest, and I still.

His eyes snap open, full of hunger and desire. My heart stutters and stops.

"Ryvan?"

He blinks and then swallows thickly. His cheeks and the tips of his ears turn a light shade of green. "Forgive me."

"For what?"

"My ears. A Fae's ears are… sensitive."

"Oh," I reply, my cheeks heating in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to—"

He gives me a lopsided grin. "It is all right."

Even as he smiles at me, heat suffuses my body at his nearness. Lying in his arms, my form molded to his, a strange warmth blooms in my core. His nostrils flare, and his eyes darken, his pupils blown wide so that only a thin rim of green is just barely visible around the edges.

Slowly, I lean in and press my lips gently to his.

His lips are warm and softer than I imagined. I trace my tongue along the seam of his mouth, but he pulls back.

"I—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have," I start to apologize but stop as his gaze holds mine intensely.

My heart pounds as he threads his fingers through my hair and tilts my face up to his. I open my mouth to speak, but he swallows my words as he captures my mouth in a claiming kiss.

His tongue moves expertly against mine, stealing the breath from my lungs. He splays his palm across the small of my back and pulls me even closer. His stav is a hard bar between us. Only the thin barrier of our clothing separates our bodies.

Unable to stop myself, I dig my nails into his back, holding tightly to him. I want him more than I've ever wanted anything before.

He rips his mouth from mine. He pulls back, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "Forgive me, Ella."

"What is wrong?"

He lowers his gaze. "We cannot do this. We cannot fall in love. I would be a danger to you and—"

"Ryvan!" A voice calls, and we both still. "Ryvan, Father is furious! He's searching for you!"

We both scramble apart and stand, turning in the direction of Eryl's voice.

My cheeks are red with embarrassment, and when I glance at Ryvan, I find his face and the tips of his ears tinged a light-green hue.

Eryl enters the cottage. "Good morning," he greets warmly, but when he shifts his gaze to Ryvan, his eyes narrow. "You must get home immediately. Father was enraged when he found out you were missing."

Ryvan jumps up, his wings fluttering furiously in agitation. He glances down at us both. "I will

return as soon as I can."

Eryl shakes his head. "Be sure you do. I can only do so much. I have no way of making sure Ella can cross the barrier without being repelled by the magic of our kingdom so that she may attend the ball this evening."

"Leave that to me," Ryvan says and rushes away.

CHAPTER 23

RYVAN

As I make my way back to the castle, the memory of Ella's lips upon mine replays in my head. Does she desire me as I do her? Does she love me?

Gritting my teeth, I try to push down these thoughts. Even if she does, she cannot be mine. We are too different, and… I am dangerous. I am Dark Fae. I think of King Erebyr. She would never be safe if I took her as my mate.

When I enter my father's chambers, his head snaps toward me. His expression is stern yet pitying at the same time. "I have found a match for you."

"What? Why?" I demand indignantly. "I thought that was the purpose of the ball this evening."

His lips flatten to a grim line. "You need someone who understands you, Ryvan; someone who knows what you are. You cannot merely choose anyone. I… do not know why I did not realize this in the first place. Perhaps it is because I still think of you as—"

"Light Fae," I finish his sentence solemnly. "You and Oradon have taught me to hide what I am very well."

He nods. "Even so, I found someone for you, my son."

I open my mouth to argue that I do not want anyone, but he lifts his palms placatingly.

"Before you protest, I want you to understand that I merely want your happiness, my son. Your bed—the vines are nearly ready to bloom."

I say nothing, for he is right. After a moment, I lower my eyes to the floor, struggling to accept my fate. "Whom did you find?"

"Lorala, daughter of Lord Fenlyr." He pauses. "She and her father, they… know about your condition. I have asked for every eligible woman to attend the ball so that the choice might be yours, Ryvan. But if you refuse to pick a mate yourself or"—he arches a brow—"you do not find one suitable, Lorala would make a good partner."

I lift my eyes to him. "How do they know?"

"I hinted at your… affliction."

"You mean my curse," I mumble, bitterness tinging my voice.

"You are not cursed, my son."

Although it is difficult, I bite back my anger. He refuses to acknowledge how dangerous I am. He always has. His love for me has blinded him to what I am.

He places a hand on my shoulder. "Think on what I have said."

My brother appears in the doorway, he darts a pointed look my way. "I, uh… need you to help me with that… project you promised to help me with."

Father's brow wrinkles. "What project?"

I purse my lips at my brother and then turn back to Father. "It's a surprise for grandfather's upcoming birthday," I tell him, hoping he will not question us further. Never mind that grandfather's birthday is still two months away.

He turns to me. "Will you consider what I've said?"

I nod, and then follow Eryl out into the hallway. "Why are you here? I thought you were going to stay with Ella until I returned?"

He blinks at me. "She asked me to leave so she could get cleaned up."

"Cleaned up?"

He nods. “Yes, I conjured a warm bath for her to use.”

I grit my teeth in frustration. “A griffin came for her last night. She should not be left alone.”

His eyes widen. “A griffin? What did—” His gaze drops to my hands and dawned understanding flits across his features. “You took care of him.”

I give him a grim nod.

“Ella witnessed your… powers?”

“Yes.” I meet his gaze. “She was not afraid either.”

He gives me a faint smile. “She has no reason to fear you, my brother. No one does.”

I clench my jaw but say nothing. Eryl and I have been over this many times. He does not recognize my curse for what it is and I do not feel like arguing with him about it right now.

He claps a hand on my shoulder. “I will help her get ready. We will find you this evening.”

I motion for him to follow me to my room. I pull the glass slippers from the drawer beside my bed. “She’ll need to wear these shoes. They are enchanted and will help her pass into our kingdom without discovery.” I pause. “You can cast the spell of deception to mask her appearance, can you not?”

“Of course.” He makes a show of bowing low to me and then grins. “No one will know she is human once I am done.”

I do not doubt his words. Eryl’s Light Magic is almost as powerful as my Dark.

CHAPTER 24

ELLA

When Eryl returns, he greets me with a grin. “Are you ready for your transformation?”

I nod.

He raises his hands and I watch as glowing blue light gathers in his palms. It turns into swirling wisps and glowing tendrils that move toward me, circling my form. Warmth travels over my skin like a gentle caress and I watch in wonder as a beautiful pale-blue dress appears, replacing my tattered servant’s clothing. With tiny crystals embedded in the fine silk, it reminds me of pure starlight. It is the most gorgeous gown I’ve ever beheld.

Eryl smiles. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful.”

He flicks his wrist and a full-length mirror appears before me. My mouth drifts open as I stare at my reflection. I reach up and touch my face. My eyes are the same shade of blue, but with a soft glow like Ryvan and Eyrl’s. My face is unchanged except for my now pointed ears. The top half of my hair is pulled back in a series of intricate braids like a crown while the rest frames my shoulders in long, chocolate waves.

I turn slightly and then smile when I notice a pair of gorgeous Fae wings peeking out from the back of my dress. I gesture to them. “Does this mean I can fly?”

Eryl shakes his head. “Unfortunately, not. Do not worry. I have another way for us to get to the ball.” His expression turns serious. “My enchantment will not last very long. Only until the last stroke of midnight. So, we must get you away from the ball before then and on your way to Luryndale to board the ship for Arnafell.”

I nod. I glance down at my feet and notice my tattered shoes peeking out from beneath the fabric. “What about—”

Eryl hands me a pair of glass slippers.

“But how will I walk in these?” I wonder aloud, since the crystal shape is unyielding.

Without waiting for him to answer, I slip them on, marveling at how they conform to my foot, the material surprisingly as soft as satin.

My brow furrows deeply. “They are the most comfortable shoes I’ve ever worn. How is that possible?”

“They are magic,” he answers. “They will allow you to pass through the barrier undetected. He gives me a pointed look. “Both slippers must remain on your feet at all times, else the magic of our kingdom will recognize you are an outsider and expel you.”

As excited as I am to attend the ball and see Ryvan again, I am desperate to understand what happened between us when we kissed. He said we cannot fall in love, but I do not understand why. I look to Eryl. “Ryvan told me he is Dark Fae. But what exactly does that mean? Why is it dangerous?”

His expression sobers. “Because Dark Fae possess the Dark Magic of destruction.”

“What does that mean?”

“They are capable of wielding the destructive forces of the elements. But it is more than just that.” He frowns. “It is dangerous because these things are tied to his emotions… he must control them lest they unleash the energy within him.”

“Is it not the same with Light Fae?” I ask, still not sure I understand.

He shakes his head. “Dark Magic is more powerful than Light.”

"But he can control it, can he not?"

"I believe that he can, but Ryvan doubts himself."

"Why?"

"The last Dark Fae King Erebyr… his powers drove him mad. He destroyed everything and everyone he loved. He would have led our kingdom to ruin if his brother had not killed him." He pauses. "That is why they are feared. That is why Ryvan worries as he does. He believes he is cursed."

My heart clenches. Tears sting my eyes but I blink them back as I think on how terrible it must be for Ryvan. To be both feared and to be fearful as well because of what he is.

I meet Eryl's gaze evenly. "That's why he wanted me to accompany him to the ball. He does not want a wife because he worries that she could be hurt."

His brother lowers his gaze and nods solemnly. "Yes."

In my heart, I know he is not dangerous. My soul aches for him because he is in such misery. I'd thought he didn't want a wife because he valued his freedom. But now I know it is because he fears what he is and does not wish to burden someone else with the dark secret he carries within him.

"Are you ready to leave?" Eryl asks.

"Yes."

Determination fills me. I love Ryvan and I do not care if he is dangerous. It's a risk I am willing to take and now… I need to convince him of this.

CHAPTER 25

ELLA

Eryl takes my hand. “You may want to close your eyes,” he murmurs. “Transportation spells can make people sick the first time they experience them.”

“What?” I ask, not sure what he’s talking about.

“Do not worry.” He winks. “Not many are able to master this spell, but I am an expert.”

“What are you—” I start to ask, but then stop.

The world spins and I squeeze my eyes shut as strong wind whips around us. After a moment, everything stills, and I open my eyes to find Eryl staring down at me in concern. “Are you all right?”

“I… think so.” I blink several times as I scan our surroundings.

We’re standing in the palace courtyard overflowing with vibrant flowering plants with glowing blooms of purple, red, yellow and blue. Guards dressed in black uniforms trimmed with silver thread line the walkway and the steps into the castle.

The white stone walls appear both formidable and elegant in the same measure. With spiraling towers that stretch up toward the sky and silver capped rooftops, it’s easy to see this structure was built as much for aesthetics as it was for defense. The massive silver doors of the entrance are etched with a lovely pattern of swirling vines and roses.

Eryl leads me up the palace steps, my arm looped through his. Several women observe us curiously, some with daggers in their eyes directed at me.

I lean toward him. “It seems you have many admirers.”

He laughs. “Not as many as Ryvan.”

Eryl’s eyes flick to mine. “Father will no doubt try to pair him with someone this evening.”

I open my mouth to reply, but stop abruptly as someone approaches Eryl and asks for my name. At first, I worry that someone has seen through my disguise, but then I realize it is simply so they can announce us when we walk in.

Eryl guides me inside. I observe everything around me in awe as we walk onto a large balcony overlooking the ballroom below. The room’s silver finishes reflect the softly glowing lights of the chandeliers above, lending the entire space an ethereal beauty. At the bottom of the grand staircase, the massive ballroom sprawls, the decorative tile floor mimicking the silver doors with the vine-and-rose pattern.

Hauntingly beautiful music, played by stringed instruments, fills the air. Fae men and women dressed in elegant tunics and gowns spin across the room in a lovely display, some even taking flight as they dance and weave amongst one another.

Tables overflowing with fluted glasses filled with bubbling pink liquid and silver platters of food line either side of the room. Against the far wall stands a throne, seating a man I assume is the king, observing the festivities.

I blink several times when I notice Ryvan standing at his side.

I lean close to Eryl. “Is that—"

“Prince Eryl of Anara and Lady Ella,” the announcer calls as we stand at the top of the grand staircase.

My mind takes a moment to process what he said. “Prince? You’re the prince?”

Eryl hesitates. “Ella, I meant to tell you, but—”

My mouth drifts open. “That means that Ryvan is—”

"Heir to the throne," he finishes my sentence.

Shock fills me, followed quickly by anger. "Why did he not tell me?"

"Ella, he—"

I draw in a deep and steeling breath. "It doesn't matter," I tell him, forcing a fake smile to my face because people are watching us.

Matching my pace, Eryl smiles back at me and leads me onto the dance floor. I'm all feet as he practically drags me around the room, nearly tripping several times in the process.

He stops and arches a brow. "I thought you had practiced?"

"I—"

"May I?" Ryvan cuts in.

He gives me a brilliant smile, and my anger dissipates almost instantly. Without hesitation, I take my place on his feet, just as we've done many times before. He pulls me closer and begins to whirl across the floor. Anyone not paying close enough attention would believe we moved in perfect sync. I'm so happy to be in his arms, I forget the shocking information Eryl just gave me until my gaze sweeps back to the king.

I narrow my eyes. "Why didn't you tell me you were the prince?"

He at least has the decency to appear chagrined. "Would it have mattered?"

"No," I answer honestly.

He arches a brow. "Then why does it matter now?"

That wasn't the response I was expecting. My cheeks flush with renewed anger. "Because you lied to me."

"Forgive me, Ella. Please. I wanted to know what it would be like to simply be… Ryvan, and not the Prince of Anara." He pauses. "Would you have treated me differently if you had known?"

I study him a moment. "I suppose it makes sense now why you thought women were going to swarm you this evening."

He frowns. "Do you really find me that unattractive that you had a hard time believing it before?"

A smile tugs at my lips. "On the contrary. You are very handsome, Ryvan." He tips up his chin, and I arch a teasing brow. "For a Fae, that is."

He laughs, and then gives me a sly smirk. "Well, I suppose you are very beautiful yourself, Ella. For a human, that is."

I laugh, as we fall into a familiar pattern of teasing each other. It is almost as if the awkwardness of our earlier kiss never happened. I gasp as he tightens his hold on me as we spin and whirl across the dance floor. His glowing green eyes hold mine as we move with the music.

One song bleeds into the next, and I cannot stop smiling. I've never had so much fun before and I don't want this night to ever end.

He leans in. His breath is warm as he whispers in my ear. "Hold onto me."

"What are you going to do?"

He flashes a mischievous grin, and then lifts into the air.

A surprised laugh escapes me. I cling tightly to him as we spin and whirl amongst the other couples, in a flying dance. He gathers me so close, there is no space between us. I can feel each beat of his heart, beneath his chest, against my own.

His glowing green eyes stare deep into mine, and everything else falls away. Nothing exists outside of this moment between us. Warmth fills me as my entire body hums in awareness of him.

"Ella," he says softly. "There is something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"I know I have already booked your passage for Arnafell, but what if you were to—"

A woman moves beside us as the song ends, interrupting him. She bows low. "Your father thought we should dance, Your Highness."

Ryvan is flustered as he lowers us back to the floor.

Jealousy sweeps through me. I do my best to keep my expression impassive as I dip my chin in a polite greeting to the woman before turning back to Ryvan.

"Excuse me, Y*our Highness*," I add with a bitter edge to my tone. "I will leave you to your partner."

I don't bother to look at him as I push away and start for the nearest door. I'm not sure where this leads, so I'm glad when I step into the palace gardens.

I have no right to be upset. We made no promises to each other beyond our agreement. We kissed, but I'm certain it meant nothing to him. After all, he's a prince. He probably has kissed many women.

Fae women, I remind myself. Beautiful, lovely, ethereal creatures with whom a human like myself could never even hope to compete. Besides, our people are enemies. The veil was created to keep out humans and other races.

Although it occurs to me, in my anger, that I am not holding up my end of the bargain. I'm supposed to be his date this evening; the one who dances with him every song to keep all others away. He does not want a wife. He's made that clear from the very beginning.

Suddenly, I feel terrible. *I* was the one who first kissed him this morning. He must have naturally responded to my affections. His response does not mean that I hold any importance to him. I was probably in a line of many women who practically throw themselves at him.

With a heavy sigh, I turn back toward the doors. I need to find him and hold up my end of our agreement. I should not have abandoned him to the first predatory woman who came his way, searching for a title.

I grasp my skirts to lift them so that I do not trip on the steps and collide with something solid.

When I look up, Ryvan is staring down at me.

"I—I was just coming back in, Ryvan." I sigh. "I'm sorry. I'm doing a poor job at upholding our agreement; I should not have left." I glance over his shoulder at the ball inside. "Come. I only have until midnight before Eryl's enchantment will fade. Let's go back in and dance."

I start to move past him, but he takes my hand, stopping me. "No, Ella. I… I'd like to speak with you. Out here, if you do not mind."

"All right."

He smiles and entwines our fingers before leading me into the gardens and away from the ball. The sound of the music inside growing fainter the further we walk. He guides me to a wooden bench near a crystal fountain.

"My grandfather had this built for my grandmother." He motions to the structure.

It is lovely. The water cascades over the edges of three tiers, spilling down into a pool below that surrounds the base.

Several streams lead into the rest of the gardens, winding along the many worn paths. I marvel at all the trees and flowering bushes full of bioluminescent blossoms that cover the entire space. It is nothing short of magical.

Fireflies flit nearby, their bodies glowing a lovely golden color.

Ryvan continues. "My grandmother passed a few years ago, but my grandfather still sits out here every day, remembering her."

I gently squeeze his hand. "You must miss her, as well."

“I do. She was one of the only ones who—” He stops abruptly, lowering his gaze. I want to know what troubles him so. I touch his cheek. “What is wrong?”

CHAPTER 26

RYVAN

She touches my cheek. "What is wrong?"

"How do you know something is wrong?"

Her gaze holds mine. "Your expression tells me as much. I've spent enough time with you that I can read when you're upset, Ryvan. What is it?"

"I told you that I am Dark Fae, but I did not explain what that means. You do not understand what I am capable of."

She meets my gaze evenly. "I witnessed your powers, and I am not afraid."

In her eyes, I see the truth. She truly does not fear me as she should. I pause, unsure if I should share this with her. "There is something you must know, Ella, but I do not know how to tell you."

"Whatever it is, I will not judge you, Ryvan. I swear."

I swallow hard against the sudden knot in my throat and draw in a deep, steeling breath. "Among my people, there are two kinds of Fae: Light and Dark."

"What differentiates them?"

"Our gifts of magic. Almost all Fae possess Light Magic, which defines their nature. They possess magic meant to create and wield the life force of the elements. But the Dark Fae… theirs is the magic of destruction and chaos. They wield the elements in a different way—a dangerous way."

Her brow wrinkles. "So, there is a balance then, just like all things in nature. Some create and some destroy."

"It is… not quite that simple."

"What do you mean?"

"Dark Fae are dangerous because of what they can do—the power they possess. Any Fae born with this power are put to death as soon as they are identified."

She inhales sharply.

Gritting my teeth, I lower my gaze, unable to meet her eyes as I give her my truth. "Because I am Dark Fae. I am dangerous, and I should have been destroyed the moment my father and grandfather discovered what I was. The day they saw what I could do."

"What happened? What did you do? What could have been so terrible that you believe they should have killed you?"

"When I was a child, enemy forces stormed our castle. My mother hid Eryl and me in a cupboard. Soldiers found her, and they—" I stop abruptly as emotions lodge in my throat. Reliving the painful memory, I force myself to continue. "They stabbed her when she tried to block them from finding us. I rushed from our hiding spot and stood between her and the men as she lay dying. I was so enraged that they'd hurt her, I—"

I look down at my hands, remembering the heat that seared my palms as my power awakened deep inside me. "I burned them all to ash, Ella. No one could stop me." I pause. "When my grandfather and father found me, they knew what I'd done. Eryl—he had witnessed everything as well. My father fell to his knees and gathered me in his arms. I remember the tears that fell from his eyes and the strange mixture of shock and despair in his expression as he cupped my face. 'You are my son. I love you and I will protect you,' he whispered to me then.

"The last Dark Fae born in our family was my great uncle. My grandfather's brother. He was put to death because of what he was. But my grandfather and father could not do the same to me. They

have kept the secret ever since. But now… my mating cycle approaches. I am volatile, Ella. You saw what I did to the griffin. How can I take a mate when I possess such destructive power deep within me? Even a single, momentary loss of control could unleash such—" My voice catches and breaks before the last word.

She takes my hand, squeezing firmly. Her eyes are bright with tears as they meet mine. "You are not dangerous, Ryvan. You are only a danger to anyone who would hurt the ones you care about. But that can be true of any person."

I blink at her in shock. "Even after all I have told you… you are not afraid of me?"

"Never." She meets my gaze evenly. "So, this is why you do not want a wife?"

"I used to hate the idea of a bondmate… but now, it has become what I want most in this world."

She retracts her hand as if burned, dropping her gaze to her lap. "Then I suppose you no longer need me to dance with you this evening. You should have no problem finding women to partner with. Everyone seemed eager to—"

I cup her chin, tipping her face up to me. A smile quirks my lips as her bewildered blue eyes search mine. "Do you really think I am interested in those women?"

Her brow furrows softly.

"I only want you, Ella," I whisper and lean in. Sadness fills me as my gaze travels over her beautiful face. "But it cannot be. I am Dark Fae. I am dangerous."

Her blue eyes search mine. "It does not matter. I am not afraid of you, Ryvan."

"You do not understand. The power I have inside me… I could hurt you. So easily and I would never forgive myself."

"You will not hurt me, Ryvan." She touches my face. "I trust you."

With a slight clench of my jaw, I bite back my frustration. "I love you, but I cannot risk—"

She crushes her lips to mine. Her small tongue darts out and I gasp at the sensation. Her tongue curls around mine, deepening our kiss.

I'm lost in her touch. I long to possess her and to be possessed. To consume her and to be consumed. I cup the back of her head, grasping the long, silken strands of her hair between my fingers as I claim her mouth the way I long to claim her: body, mind, heart, and soul.

"We should not fall in love," I barely manage between kisses.

"It is too late for that, Ryvan." She smiles against my lips. "Do you not know that I already love you?"

Happiness blooms in my chest, and I pull her even closer. So close that there is no space between our bodies. I wrap my arms and wings around her as she holds just as tightly to me.

I bear her to the ground. I want her so much it is maddening. My fangs extend with want to claim her—to seal her to me and make her mine in all ways.

I pull back just enough to gaze down at her. Breathless and panting, her skin is flushed a lovely pink hue.

"You would be mine despite my darkness?"

She reaches up to cup my cheek, brushing the soft pad of her thumb across my lower lip. "Yes," she breathes.

Happiness brighter than a thousand stars fills me, and I thread my fingers through her hair, capturing her mouth again in a searing kiss.

"I want to bind you to me in the ways of my people," I breathe between kisses. I am on the razor-sharp edge of my control. I want her so much it is maddening. "I want to mark your flesh so that all will know you are mine, Ella. And if my father will not accept you because you are human, we will

go to Arnafell together."

"Ryvan," she gasps, as I trace a line of kisses down the elegant column of her neck. "I cannot let you give up everything for me, my love."

My head snaps up to hers. "I would give up everything for you, Ella. Tell me you are mine," I demand. "I need to hear the words."

"I am yours, Ryvan," she says softly. "Only yours."

Her words ripple through me, dissolving the last of my control. I dip my head to the curve of her neck and shoulder, and trace my tongue over the pulsing artery along her neck, tasting the sweet salt of her skin.

My fangs extend into sharpened points with the urge to mark her and claim her as mine. Music drifts out from the palace nearby; I cannot take her here. Not like this, not out in the open where we might be discovered.

But I cannot pull away no matter how hard I try. I dip my fingers beneath the neckline of her dress and pull the fabric down, revealing the softly rounded globes of her breasts. I close my mouth over one peak and am rewarded with a surprised gasp, followed by a low moan a moment before her fingers thread through my hair, holding me in place.

"Ryvan," she whispers. "That feels so good."

I cup her other breast. The pale, creamy mound is so pliant and giving beneath my palm. Her nipples bead as if begging for my touch. Lightly, I scrape my teeth over one, and she gasps and pulls me even closer.

My nostrils flare as the scent of her arousal grows thick in the air around us. I want her so much it is maddening. Her skin is soft beneath the tips of my fingers as I trace them up her inner thigh. I lift my head and kiss her passionately. When I reach the juncture of her thighs and feel the silken scrap of material that covers her there, I hesitate. I pull back to find her eyes are half-lidded and full of desire.

She leans in and kisses me again, whispering against my lips. "I want you to touch me, Ryvan."

Desire pulses through me as I retract my claws and dip my fingers beneath the silken fabric. I drag them lightly through her already slick folds.

She gasps when I touch the small bundle of nerves at the top. Her head falls back with a low moan as I concentrate my attentions on the sensitive pearl of flesh.

My stav is hard and erect, pressing insistently against the seam of my pants. I long to join my body to hers.

I cannot take her fully until we've bonded. Right now, I want only to pleasure her. "Tell me how to touch you, my Ella."

She clings to me, meshing her lips to mine.

I wrap my wings around her as I continue to tease at her sensitive flesh. Carefully, I insert one finger into her entrance, and she arches against me.

"More," she breathes against my lips.

I insert a second finger, and she moans my name. I begin a slow and steady rhythm, stroking my fingers in and out of her channel as I brush my thumb over the soft pearl of flesh that makes her entire body light with pleasure. She throws her head back as another moan escapes her.

I grip her chin, tipping her face back to mine as I stare deep into her eyes. "I want to watch you reach your climax."

Her breath emerges in short, clipped pants as I continue to pump my fingers into her warm, wet heat. Her body goes taut like a bowstring as the muscles of her channel quiver and flex around me. I capture her mouth, swallowing her sounds of pleasure as she finds her release.

CHAPTER 27

ELLA

I've touched myself before, but it's never felt like this. I pant heavily as I come down from my pleasure while Ryvan withdraws his hand. He smooths my skirts back into place. His gaze holds mine as he brings his fingers to his lips and closes his mouth around them.

Closing his eyes, he groans as if I am the best thing he's ever tasted. He leans in and kisses me passionately. He brushes the hair back from my face as he stares down at me, his gaze full of fire and possession. "I want to bind you to me, Ella." He drops his head to the curve of my neck and shoulder. "But we must wait. I need to speak with my father."

Worry fills me. "What if he does not agree to our bonding?"

He lifts his head, and I touch his cheek. Desire still burns in his eyes, but he moves off me and pulls me to my feet beside him.

He wraps his arms and wings around me tightly as he kisses me long and deep. When he pulls back, he gently rests his forehead to mine. "My father loves me; I will make him see reason." He presses a tender kiss to my lips. "Wait here, my love."

My brow furrows. "Where are you going?"

"I am going to bring my father out here so we may give him our news in private." He grins. "I will return shortly."

I watch his retreating form disappear into the castle. I'm nervous about meeting Ryvan's father. I understand his hatred of humans, but I pray that he accepts me. I love Ryvan. I want a life with him.

The fluttering of wings draws my attention and I lift my head to find Eryl flying toward me. He lands in front of the bench, cocking his head to the side to regard me. "What are you doing out here, Ella?"

My cheeks flush at the memory of what Ryvan and I did only a few moments ago, and I send a silent prayer of thanks to the gods that Eryl did not find us then.

"I'm waiting for Ryvan to return."

He glances back toward the castle. "It may be a while."

My brow furrows. "Why do you say that?"

"Father has found a match for Ryvan."

I still. "He has?"

"Yes. Father is convinced she is a good match. He wants to announce it tonight at the ball." Eryl sighs. "I doubt Ryvan will agree to it even though it may be best for him. Her Light Magic is very strong. Father believes it will be a good balance for Ryvan's Dark Magic."

"That's important?"

"Very. Her magic could help him control his so that his abilities remain hidden from our people." His eyes search mine a moment as if considering me before he continues. "You saw Ryvan's powers. His Dark Magic is… strong. More so even than the last Dark Fae King Erebyr that once ruled these lands."

Dread fills me as I think back on what Eryl told me of this king. "You said he nearly destroyed the entire kingdom."

His gaze holds mine. "Then you understand how important it is for us to hide what Ryvan is. All Dark Fae are put to death immediately upon discovery because of this."

I shake my head. "I don't understand. Why would this be an automatic death sentence? Ryvan is a

good person. He would never do something like that."

With a slight clench of his jaw, Eryl lowers his gaze. "That is the danger with Dark Fae. Their powers must be carefully controlled for they have the ability to overwhelm and consume them. This is what happened to Erebyr. "His powers were so great, even his bondmate's Light Magic was unable to balance him." He pauses. "He lost himself to the darkness within and he destroyed everything that he loved, including his family. He went mad and would have razed the entire kingdom of Anara to the ground if his brother had not killed him first."

Tears sting my eyes, but I blink them back. "This woman your father has found for him… she could help him avoid such a fate?"

"Yes," he replies solemnly. "I understand why my brother does not wish to bond with anyone. He believes he is cursed. Perhaps father is right, and bonding with someone strong in Light Magic may be the answer to keep him balanced and prevent him from following in the path of King Erebyr."

His words hit me like a physical blow. I do not possess inherent magic like Ryvan's people, and can do nothing to help counter his Dark Magic. I cannot bond with Ryvan. Not when it could put his life at risk.

It is almost midnight and the enchantment concealing my true form will fade away when the clock strikes twelve. I have to find Ryvan before then, and tell him that we cannot be together. I cannot allow him to risk his life by bonding to me.

I turn to Eryl. "Please, you must take me to him. I need to speak with Ryvan."

He nods, and then leads me back to the palace.

CHAPTER 28

RYVAN

I want Ella as my bondmate. I have never desired anything as much as I desire her. Surely Father will understand once I speak to him.

As I make my way through the crowd, myriad scenarios play out in my mind. If worse comes to worst, I will simply leave with Ella for Arnafell. Together, we will start a new life abroad.

When I reach the dais, my father's eyes flash with anger. Inhaling deeply, I start up the stairs toward him. "Father?"

He narrows his eyes. "Where were you?"

"I…" My voice trails off when I notice Lorala ascending the stairs, her father, Lord Fenlyr, trailing behind her.

Father stands and raises his hands, motioning for the crowd to pay attention. Panic sparks inside me.

"Father, wait," I whisper through gritted teeth.

"No, Ryvan. I've already waited long enough," he hisses. "Honored guests, I have an announcement to make."

All eyes turn to us, and dread fills me. "Father, no."

"My son, Prince Ryvan," he announces, loud enough to thunder over my voice, "heir to the throne of Anara, is to be bonded to Lady Lorala Fenlyr."

I peer at the crowd, numb with shock, as everyone cheers. Everyone except for my brother, who is watching me with surprise written across his features. Ella stands beside him, her blue gaze locked on mine. Her expression is full of sadness as a tear slips down her cheek.

Panic tightens my chest as the clock begins to chime on the hour. It's midnight. The enchantment hiding Ella will fade once the last bell sounds.

Her mouth drifts open as worry flits across her features. She spins on her heels and races toward the door.

"Ella!" I shout, but she does not turn around.

I rush after her, pushing my way through the crowd. The world slows around me as the space between each chime of the clock seems to grow longer. Even flying is impossible as everyone gathers around me, slowing my chase as they offer their congratulations on my betrothal.

But all I can think of, and all I can see is Ella. My heart hammers in my chest, I'm desperate to reach her. I have to explain.

I call out to her again but she keeps going. When I reach the outside, she's already halfway down the path, heading toward the forest.

I race toward her, my wings fluttering furiously to catch up. "Ella, please! Wait!"

I come up behind her, spreading my arms wide to gather her to my chest. The moment my arms wrap around her smaller form, I lift her from the ground as the final toll of the hour sounds.

Her enchanted disguise fades away as I spin her in my arms to face me. Her face is puffy and red, her eyelids swollen as tears stream down her face.

"Ella, please. Listen to me. Let me explain. My father made the announcement against my wishes. I don't want to bond with Lorala. I won't. I only want you."

She shakes her head softly as she cups my cheek. "You must choose her, Ryvan. We cannot be together."

I search her eyes in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“You have to let me go. It is too dangerous for you to be with me. Eryl told me what could happen if you were to lose yourself to the darkness. You need her Light Magic to help you.”

“No, Ella. I only want you.”

“And I don’t want you to be killed.” She chokes back a sob. “I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you, Ryvan. You have to let me go.”

“Ella, I—"

The glass slipper falls from her left foot as the last chime of the hour strikes. Glowing green light surrounds her. Her blue eyes meet mine, full of pain. “You have to let me go, Ryvan.”

“Ella, please listen to me. I—"

In the blink of an eye, she disappears. I tip forward from the sudden loss of her weight as she’s ripped from my hold by the magic that protects our kingdom. I drop to the ground and quickly gather the glass slipper.

If I’m right, the magic will have left her on the other side of the veil at the exact spot where she first crossed. I lift off and rush toward the forest, desperate to reach her. My heart pounds as I fly through the trees. The long branches pull at my form, but I summon the wind and push them aside, snapping off several in the process.

The glowing light of the veil up ahead sparks hope in my chest. I gasp as soon as I reach it and find the barrier completely repaired. I beat my fists against the wall, crying out her name.

“Ryvan.”

I recognize the voice of my father. Slowly, I spin to face him. Disbelief followed quickly by anger fills me and I point to the veil. “Did you do this? Did you have it repaired?”

“Of course, I did,” he replies indignantly. “We cannot have a breach in our defenses.”

I grit my teeth. “Did you have me followed?”

“I care about you,” he replies, providing me with all the answer I need. I thought I’d been careful to avoid detection, but it seems I was wrong.

I glare at him. “Let me pass.”

He tips up his chin. “No.”

“If you do not lower the barrier, I will break it down with my magic.”

Power arcs across the tips of my fingers, crackling like bits of lightning as it builds deep within. Closing my eyes, I gather the darkness, rallying it to me as I ready to take down the veil.

“Do it,” my father says. “If for no other reason than to realize exactly why you cannot be with her.”

I still.

He continues. “Can you not see how dangerous it would be for you to bond with a human? A creature that possesses no innate magic to counter your own?” He steps forward, his gaze holding mine intently. “Do you want to end up like King Erebyr? Destroying everything and everyone you love?”

“That will not happen,” I grind out. “I can control it.”

His gaze drops to my hands, the magic still sparking across my palm. “Are you certain? Because unless you are… you must let her go.”

Sadness tightens my chest for his words are truth. I curl my hands into fists at my side, struggling to contain the destructive power that threatens to break free.

“You do not understand, Father. Her stepmother is a witch. She will—”

Oradon appears behind him. I had not noticed him earlier and suspect he used a transportation

spell to arrive with such stealth. He bows low before me. “My prince—Ryvan,” he corrects himself. “I have cast a protection spell upon her. The witch cannot harm her now.”

Relief fills me, but it is quickly overshadowed by my devastation.

Father places a hand on my shoulder. “I am sorry, Ryvan. But know that everything I do is to protect you, my son. I do not want you to end up like Erebyr. His power was too great, Ryvan. He killed his own bondmate and child. Can you not understand that I am trying to help you?”

I shake my head. “I would never harm her. I couldn’t. I love her too much.”

“And that is why it would destroy you, Ryvan. Could you live with yourself if—”

“Enough!” I squeeze my eyes shut against the pain. The image of Ella staring at me through tear-filled eyes surfaces in my mind. I lower my head in defeat. “I understand.”

“Come.” He squeezes my shoulder. “Let us go home.”

CHAPTER 29

ELLA

The world tilts and spins around me a moment before I'm ripped from Ryvan's arms, spinning away into a darkened void. When I open my eyes, I'm back in the cottage near the veil. I glance down at my feet and notice I'm only wearing one slipper. Without the other one, the magic that protects the kingdom of Anara must have recognized that I'm human and expelled me, just as Ryvan explained it would.

I walk outside and my eyes immediately go to the barrier. The break I'd made only a few weeks ago is repaired and I cannot see anything beyond the glowing wall.

I move toward it and extend my hand, wondering if the slipper will allow me to pass.

Disappointment fills me when it does not. But perhaps this is for the best.

Tears sting my eyes and blur my vision as devastation consumes me. A deep ache settles in my chest and I can barely breathe. As hard as it was to see Ryvan with Lorala, I understand now that he must choose her for his bondmate.

We cannot be together.

He needs her Light Magic to balance his darkness; to help keep it hidden so he is not put to death for being Dark Fae.

I rest my hand against the glowing magic of the veil as another tear slips down my cheek. "Goodbye, my love," I whisper. "I will love you. Always."

Sadness tightens my chest and I turn and race through the forest. Branches pull at my dress, but I force myself to push forward, desperate to get as far away from the veil and the kingdom of Anara as possible.

I cannot bear to be here anymore. It is too painful to remain in the place where I first met him… where I fell in love with his glowing green eyes and his handsome smile.

I love him but I have to let him go. It must be this way. We cannot be together. I cannot protect him like Lorala can. I love him too much to allow him to risk his life by bonding to me.

CHAPTER 30

RYVAN

Devastation is written across the face of my reflection in the veil and a tear of frustration escapes my lashes and slips down my cheek.

I have lost her. Forever.

Poetry suggests that the heart is the seat of all emotion, but I had never really believed this. Closing my eyes, an image of Ella fills my mind and a sharp pain stabs at my chest. I place my hand over my heart as if that will somehow dull the terrible ache, and I realize now that these poems speak truth.

Father, Oradan, and I make our way back to the castle in silence. When we reach the entrance Eryl rushes toward me. "Ryvan, what happened?"

Unable to hide my grief, I lift my gaze to his as despair bleeds into my voice. "I loved her and I have lost her, Eryl. She is gone."

Eryl places a hand on my shoulder as his gaze locks with mine, his expression full of pity. "I am sorry, Ryvan. Truly."

I want to rage at him for telling her what he did, but I cannot. He spoke nothing but truth. It is not my brother's fault that I am cursed.

As we walk inside, the palace seems deserted. Most of the guests probably left soon after my father's announcement, once they realized that their goal for the evening was no longer attainable.

I'm about to make my way to my chambers when an impulse stops me. I must speak with Lorala first.

When I reach her guest chambers, I knock. It doesn't take long for her to answer, her surprise to see me easily read in her eyes.

"Ryvan. I—I did not expect you." She hesitates. "Is it your mating cycle? Did you come because you—"

"No."

Her shoulders sag in relief; she is obviously pleased by my answer.

"I came here to tell you that I cannot bond with you."

She frowns. "Have I displeased you?"

"No," I quickly reassure her. "It is nothing you have done."

She takes my hand. "You are my friend, Ryvan. We have known each other since childhood. I know what you are, and I would protect you if I can. So, if that is what you are worried about, you need not be concerned. I already know the truth. We may not be in love, but I care about you; I would not see you put to death."

With a slight clench of my jaw, I lower my gaze. "Your words and your kindness mean more to me than you could possibly know, Lorala. But it is more than that." I lift my eyes to her. "I am in love with someone else."

She tilts her head to the side to regard me. "Is it the woman you danced with this evening?"

"Yes."

"Is her Light Magic strong enough to—"

"No. She is human. Her true form was concealed by magic."

Lorala blinks several times in shock, but says nothing.

I continue. "Even though I cannot be with her, I also understand that I can be with no one else,

either." I swallow against the lump in my throat as I give her my truth. "My heart still beats within my chest, but it is no longer mine. It belongs only to her."

Her eyes meet mine, full of pity. "I am sorry, Ryvan. A broken heart can be a terrible thing. I cannot deny that I worried our bonding would be… uncomfortable, because I consider you a friend, not a lover. Know that you will always have my support, and that I will keep your secret, my dear friend."

"Thank you, Lorala."

CHAPTER 31

RYVAN

When I reach my father's chambers, I knock on his door. He does not answer, but I enter anyway. My father has repeatedly told us he would always make time for his children, no matter what. Today, I will take advantage of this promise to speak with him.

I find him out on the balcony, staring up at the silver moon.

"What do you wish to speak of, my son?" he asks, sensing my approach. He does not turn around, even when I stop beside him.

"I spoke with Lorala and informed her that I cannot bond with her. We are close as siblings, she and I. It would never have worked."

His expression is stern. "But she knows what you are, and she would have been able to balance your powers with hers. Did the human even know what you were?" Even as the question leaves his mouth, pity tinges his tone. "Is that why she ran from you?"

Clenching my jaw, I hold his gaze. "No, Father. She left because she *wanted* me to choose Lorala."

He blinks across at me.

I continue. "She worried that because she does not possess magic, it would be too dangerous for us to bond."

"She is right," he says. "At least she was wise enough to fear for herself.

I shake my head. "You don't understand. She was not afraid for herself, she feared for me. She worried that I needed Lorala's Light Magic to balance my darkness and protect me from being discovered as Dark Fae."

His expression softens. "I am sorry that you lost her. Truly. But she is human. Why would you get involved with one in the first place? Especially after what happened to your mother."

"Not all humans are bad, Father. You cannot judge an entire race based on the actions of only a few." I meet his gaze evenly. "Please. Allow me to cross the veil. I want only to see her one more time. I didn't get to tell her goodbye."

He shakes his head. "Can you not see that this is what is best for her? She wants to protect you, but in this way… you are protecting her. If you truly love her, you must let her go."

"Oradon saw her in my future, Father," I counter. "Her name is Ella—*starlight* in the ancient tongue. His visions spoke of starlight and the silver moon. What if she is meant to be mine?"

He turns to me with incredulity. "You are Dark Fae. Your powers are dangerous. At the very least, you need a Light Fae to balance you and ensure the power does not overwhelm you, causing you to harm anyone or bring death and destruction to our kingdom." He places his hands on my shoulders. "You are my son. I have only ever kept you safe. Even when the sacred laws directed me to end your life because of what you are. Can you not see that I am trying to protect you?" He pauses. "You cannot bond with a human. It would be too dangerous for you *and* for her."

I drop my gaze to my hands. He is right. I am dangerous. It would never work between us. There would always be a risk that I could hurt her.

Father wraps an arm around my shoulders and hugs me close. "I love you, Ryvan. You are my son, and I will always protect you with everything I have. But in this, you must trust me. If you love her, you *must* let her go."

CHAPTER 32

ELLA

Tears stream down my face as I make my way through the forest. I cannot go back to the estate and I cannot return to Anara. As much as I love Ryvan, I must let him go.

I try to comfort myself with the knowledge that Lorala should be able to protect him—to balance his dark magic and keep it hidden from their people. Even as I think this, a terrible ache stabs at my chest at the knowledge that he will belong to another and I will never see him again.

I close my eyes against the pain, struggling to hold back my tears. I reach up and feel of my stone necklace—the one he infused with his magic. It is warm against my skin as I clutch it tightly. A tear slips down my cheek. This is all I have left of the man who has my heart.

Drawing in a deep breath, I force myself to continue on through the woods. The light of the full silver moon overhead provides enough illumination to guide my steps as I make my way back to the estate.

Now that I am back in the kingdom of Eryadon, there is nowhere that I may hide from my stepmother's magic. I doubt she has stopped trying to find me. She needs me to marry Mr. Malforn to pay off her debts. I could try to make it to the port city of Cambryn and escape on a ship, but I fear she will find me before I get very far.

A flash of light draws my attention and I turn toward it. Ice fills my veins when I see my stepmother standing off to the side. As if my very thoughts have summoned my greatest fear, her glowing, reptilian amber eyes meet mine and a sneer curls her lips. "Where have you been, my dear stepdaughter?" she asks darkly. "Did you really believe you could hide from me forever?"

Fear wraps tight around my chest. "Stepmother, I—"

The words die in my throat as she grips my forearm in an iron vise. The world spins and falls away. A terrified scream rips from my throat as I tumble through a blackened void.

Gray walls suddenly appear; the air is forced from my lungs as my back slams against a cold, stone floor. I blink up at the ceiling, trying to focus as my gaze travels over my surroundings.

Slowly, I sit up and the room begins to spin. I lean forward, placing my head in my hands as I pray for the dizziness to pass.

Two fingers tip up my chin, sharp claws pressing against my tender flesh as my stepmother forces my gaze to hers. Her reptilian eyes stare at me icily as her mouth curves up in a sinister grin. "Now that I have you again, you will remain here until Mr. Malforn comes to collect you for your wedding."

"I will not marry him," I state firmly. "You cannot make me."

"You will, and I can." She spins toward the door and steps out into the hallway. The heavy door creaks on its hinges as she slams it shut and turns the lock. "I will come for you later."

The clipped sound of her steps as she moves down the hallway echoes softly. I listen at the door, waiting until I can no longer hear her nearby. As soon as I'm satisfied that she's gone, I retrieve the spellbook from the shelf.

The large tome is heavy, but I manage to set it down gently on the workbench, careful to not make any noise. I take great care as I turn the worn and yellowing pages, searching for a spell I can use. Something simple that requires no ingredients or potions to conjure.

It doesn't take long to find what I need. As I scan the words of the binding spell, I commit them to memory. I wrap my hand around the stone pendant Ryvan gave me, feeling the warmth of the magic against my skin. I can do this. I have to. I will not be forced to marry Mr. Malforn, and I will not be a

servant to my goblin stepmother any longer.

As soon as I'm confident I have the spell memorized, it is an easy thing to unlock the door. After years of being locked away by my stepmother, every time she grew angry with me, I learned long ago how to pick a simple lock.

Slowly, I open the door, wincing as it creaks on the hinges. I still for a moment, listening for any sound that someone may have heard. When I detect nothing, I step out into the hallway.

It's dark, so I place my hand along the uneven stone wall to guide myself toward the stairwell. A bead of sweat trickles down my spine as I ascend the spiraling steps, careful to move as quietly as possible.

My shoe scrapes against a small rock and I hold my breath as it falls down the stairs, echoing loudly in the silence as it skips down toward the floor.

Soft light appears up ahead and I make my way toward it. When I reach the main level of the house, I carefully peek around the corner. No one is around.

Drawing in a deep and steadying breath, I step out into the hallway and make my way toward the light in the study. It has to be my stepmother. No one else would be up this late.

The door to the room is cracked open just enough that I'm able to glance inside. My eyes immediately go to the large chair near the fireplace. My stepmother is seated, paging through a book as the dancing flames cast her shadow in sinister relief across the floor.

My pulse pounds in my ears as I slowly creep forward. Raising my hands, I ready myself to conjure the spell that should bind her.

She stills and then slams the book shut. "I know you are here," she snarls. She jumps up from the chair and spins to face me, baring her sharp goblin teeth as her nails extend into sharpened black claws. "How dare you," she grinds out. "After all I have done for you. You ungrateful wretch!"

Despite my fear, I begin reciting the words of magic.

She raises her hands. Lighting arcs across the tips of her fingers as a black orb forms in her palms. She throws it toward me.

I gasp as it flies across the room and then slams with a thunderous boom against an invisible barrier before me, and then fizzles out.

"A barrier spell?" She stares at me in shock. "How did you manage this?"

I do not know, nor do I have time to think on it. I close my eyes as I speak the words of enchantment. Another loud boom splits the air, slamming against the barrier as she tries to cast another spell.

The stone of my necklace grows warm against my skin as I call upon its borrowed magic to cast the spell of binding.

"What are you doing? You cannot—" My stepmother screeches in alarm and then goes silent.

My entire body is trembling with fear as I force myself to open my eyes, afraid of what I might find. Relief moves through my body as she stands before me, her hands neatly clasped together in front of her as if waiting for something. "Stepmother?"

I lift my gaze to hers and find an icy glare reflected back at me despite the honeyed words that leave her mouth in reply. "Yes, dear? What can I do for you?"

Hope fills my chest as I step forward. A faint smile crests my lips. "You can wait here very

quietly while I go deal with my stepsisters as well."

She narrows her eyes. "Of course, my dear."

CHAPTER 33

RYVAN

Ten days have passed since the veil closed. Each night, I go to the barrier where we used to meet, wishing somehow that I might be able to see her. I long only to know that she is all right.

Oradon said he cast a spell of protection over her, but I cannot help but worry. His magic may not be as strong as that of her stepmother. I do not know whether the witch found her when she returned. If she did, I wonder whether Ella was punished for running away in the first place.

I sent word to my friend Prince Caelen in the Elven kingdom of Rivenyl. His people still deal with the human kingdom of Eryadon. I've asked him to seek out any word of her, to please find out if she is safe. I have received no response from him yet, but it has only been a few days since I wrote, not long enough for his network to discover anything.

I return to the palace, making my way through the gardens, where I notice Eryl seated with my grandfather. Ella's shoe lies in his hands.

Eryl lifts his head and smiles as I approach. "Brother, we have good news!"

"What is it?"

My grandfather turns to me. "Eryl told me about Ella. I believe I know a way to help you."

I frown. "How?"

Eryl holds up the crystal slipper. "Ella left this behind, but she must still have the other one because you did not find it when you chased after her."

"What does that matter?"

"If we can get this to her, she will be able to use it to cross the veil into our kingdom," Grandfather answers. "She can return if she has both glass slippers."

Sadness fills me. "It does not matter. Father is right. I am Dark Fae. It is too dangerous for her to be with me." I look down at my hands. "I cannot risk following in the path of King Erebyr. I would never forgive myself if I were to ever harm her. Do you not understand? I love her too much."

Grandfather stands and places a hand on my shoulder, his gaze locked on mine. "Do not give up so easily, Ryvan. If I had given up, I would never have bonded with your grandmother, and none of you would be here today."

I open my mouth to reply, but a dark shadow passes overhead, blocking the sunlight. When I lift my gaze to the sky, my jaw drops. A silver dragon, nearly ten times the size of a Fae, is flying toward the castle.

His silver scales reflect brilliantly beneath the sun like tight chains of heavy, impenetrable armor. His dark-silver wings billow like great sails, and his massive horned head is trained on the castle, his emerald eyes locked on his prize.

Alarms blare throughout the city, and our guards rush to take their posts, each readying their arrows. They know as well as I that the metal tips of their arrows will never pierce the beast's thick scales.

Eryl's eyes are wide with fear. "How did he get this close? They won't be able to stop him in time."

Dozens of arrows shoot toward him from the palace walls to no avail.

Dragon scales can only be pierced by l'omhara—the rarest and most precious of all metals. It is so difficult to mine that only a few arrows made from this ore are stored in the weapon's chambers.

Our guards will not be able to retrieve them in time to fell the dragon before he reaches the castle.

Desperate, I ascend to face him. My wings flap furiously behind me as I race through the clouds to challenge the ancient foe of my people. Energy arcs through my body like lightning as I unleash the darkness deep within. I am Dark Fae—bearer and bringer of destruction. I will die before I allow him to destroy my family and our home.

CHAPTER 34

RYVAN

My brother calls out to me as I take to the sky, but I do not turn back. I cannot allow this dragon to destroy my home and hurt our people. I will save them or die trying.

Curling my hands into fists at my side, I summon my powers as I race toward him. The dark, primal magic buried deep within claws its way to the surface as I draw closer. Fire and anger flood my veins as I struggle to contain it, holding it back until I reach my goal.

The dragon turns his massive horned head toward me, his emerald eyes flashing with indignation as if he cannot believe he is being challenged.

"Leave, Dragon! Or face your death!"

"Not until I get what I have come for," he roars.

I conjure a ball of flame and send it spiraling toward him. His eyes widen, and he twists to one side, barely avoiding my attack. He opens his mouth and releases a torrent of fire in my direction. Without hesitation, I summon a strong wind, pushing the flames back before they can reach me.

I lift my hands to conjure an answering ball of flame when a voice cries out, "Stop!"

Though the voice came from the direction of the dragon, it was female.

"Veron, stop!" she calls again.

I ascend even higher, blinking several times in shock when I notice a human female on his back. She shouts at me, "Please! We have come to speak with you."

I cock my head to the side. "Who are you? His prisoner?"

The dragon huffs an indignant curl of smoke out his nostrils. "No," he answers, his voice deep and full of anger. "She is my bondmate."

"Please," she repeats. "We must speak with you."

I nod and turn to our guards. All are staring in dismay, and I do not know if they are more concerned about the dragon or my Dark Fae powers. I suspect it is a combination of both.

"Follow me down," I tell him, and he dips his chin in acknowledgment.

When we land before the castle, he shifts into two-legged form, wrapping his hands around his mate's waist and carefully lowering her to the ground.

I study him for a moment. His silver scales shine iridescently beneath the sun. He is tall, and his shoulders are broad, his form solidly built. Short-cropped, dark hair frames the black horns that stick up on either side of his head, above emerald-green eyes and a proud, square jaw. His vertically slit pupils rake over my form as he stands tall and proud. He would be a formidable enemy even in his two-legged state. He is a dangerous and lethal creature; I hope he speaks truth when he says he has come only to speak and not destroy.

I am perplexed, however, by his mate. Her form is slight, and the top of her head is barely level with his chin. With long, blonde hair falling around her shoulders, pale skin, and deep-blue eyes, she is not a dragon nor any otherworldly creature. "Are you… human?"

She smiles. "Yes."

He growls and steps between us, flicking his tail back and forth in obvious agitation. Only now do I notice her hand resting protectively over her slightly rounded stomach.

His gaze travels over me and the guards that surround us. "If any of you dare try to harm my mate, I will end you," he snarls. "I will raze your castle to the ground and burn your kingdom to ash."

She smacks at his hand. "Veron, stop it. We already talked about this."

A collective gasp sounds from the guards, obviously shocked to watch a small, delicate human chastise a dragon.

He turns and touches her cheek, his expression softening. “I am merely trying to protect you, my mate.”

She smiles at him. “I know, my love.”

My love? I can only blink in astonishment. A human mated to a dragon? I have never heard of such a pairing.

“I am Alara,” she introduces herself, “and this is my mate, Veron.”

He wraps a possessive arm around her. Tugging her close, he curls one wing around her side protectively. “We are here to speak with the king.”

“I am Prince Ryvan. What business do you have with my father?”

A growl rumbles the dragon’s chest. “I sent an ambassador here not long ago, requesting his assistance in extending the life of my human mate to match mine.”

“Do I have your word that you will not cause any problems?”

He narrows his eyes. “If anyone dares try to harm my mate, I will—”

“No one will harm her. My vow.”

He nods, and I motion for him to follow me into the throne room.

As expected, the moment we reach the doors, dozens of guards block our path. I wave them aside. “Allow him to pass. He comes in peace.”

They move aside at my orders but watch him warily. I push open the doors to the throne room and find my father standing in front of his throne. Dressed in full-body armor, he glares at the dragon. “How dare you come into my kingdom without my permission?”

“I sent an ambassador to you first,” the dragon counters. “But you sent him away without an answer. I had no choice.”

Father narrows his eyes. “In truth, I did not believe him when he told me your story.” His eyes dart to Alara, widening when he notices her hand resting protectively over her slightly rounded stomach. “You carry his child?”

She smiles again. “Yes.”

Veron addresses my father. “Now you understand why I wished to speak with you. I want to know how to extend my mate’s life to match mine. I have heard that your kind and the Elves have done this for their human mates in the past.”

“This is true,” my father replies. “But we have not dealt with humans for many years.” His eyes dart to me. “Nor do we mate with their kind anymore.”

“Can you help me or not?” Veron snarls.

I step forward. “I know of one who can. I will take you to him.”

Panic flickers briefly across Father’s face, but he quickly masks it with stoicism. He motions for the guards to follow us, but I wave them off. “Thank you, Father, but that won’t be necessary.”

He stands and steps toward Veron. “If you harm my son—”

Veron eyes me warily. “Your son is the strongest Fae I have ever encountered. I would not attack him without provocation. My vow.”

A hushed silence falls over the room as Father dips his chin in acknowledgment.

I motion for Veron and Alara to follow me.

As I lead them through the castle, I look to them, “I would ask a question of you both.”

Veron narrows his eyes, but Alara smiles at me. “What is it?”

My eyes sweep to Veron. “Your people are known for their strength. Are you not afraid you could

hurt her? And you." I shift my gaze to her. "You do not fear him?"

"Why do you ask this?" Veron answers. "She has already told you she is not held against her will."

"I meant no offense," I quickly offer. "I am merely curious because I, too, am in love with a human."

He stops and cocks his head to the side. "And you are afraid you might harm her?"

I nod. "You saw my powers."

"Dark Fae," he muses. "Yes, I am familiar with your kind, but you are not many. At least… not anymore."

"That is true. We are…" I hesitate, uncertain of how much to reveal, but then decide that I have no one else to ask but him. "Considered dangerous," I finally say. "We are supposed to be put to death when it is discovered that we possess dark magic."

Alara gasps. "That's terrible."

"And foolish," Veron huffs out a curl of smoke. "Your kind are the only ones nearly equal in power to a dragon. How is it you still live?"

"My father and grandfather have kept my nature hidden."

She gestures to Veron. "About your question… Yes, my husband is powerful and much stronger than me. But he loves me, and his love makes him tender and gentle. I know for a fact that he would never hurt me."

Veron smiles at his mate, and my brows shoot toward my hairline. I had no idea dragons even smiled.

He turns to me. "It is not a disadvantage to be stronger than your mate. It only means that you can protect her better than anyone else ever could. If you love her more than your own life, trust me… you will not be capable of harming her." He wraps his wing around Alara, pulling her close to his side. "She balances me—the good and the bad. Before I met her, I cared not for the lives of any but mine. She showed me a different path. Because of her, I no longer succumb to my darker instincts."

His words fill me with hope. He is right; I love Ella. Even though I am Dark Fae, I would never use my power to harm her. *No*. I would only ever be her shield and her protector. Now, I only need to convince her to come back to me somehow.

CHAPTER 35

RYVAN

When we reach Oradon's chambers, his eyes widen. His workshop is so deep in the ground beneath the castle, I can only assume he did not hear the commotion when Veron and Alara arrived earlier. "You bring a dragon to me? Why?"

It is not often I see Oradon flustered. I cannot deny it is amusing to surprise him with this. I gesture to our guests. "This is Veron and his human mate, Alara. They are here because he wants to know the secret to extending his mate's life to match his."

Oradon gapes at him for a moment before finally responding, "You are mated to a human?"

Veron tips his chin up as he takes her hand. "Yes. Now will you help us or not?"

Oradon blinks at them both. "Um… Fir—first, I must assess her, then I will know if it can be done."

"Why could it not?" Veron snaps. "Your people can do this for their humans."

"Yes, but we do it with the marking of our human mates during the first mating. Our mark is an extension of our life force, binding us to each other. I do not know how it would work for your kind, Dragon." Oradon scowls at him. "Now, will you allow me to assess your mate?"

Veron shares a glance with Alara, and something unspoken passes between them. She steps forward.

Oradon lifts his hands, and a glowing orb appears in his palms. It hovers for a moment then approaches Alara, circling her form and Veron's before returning to him and disappearing.

"Well?" Veron asks, not bothering to hide the irritation in his voice.

A smile quirks Oradon's lips. "It seems a dragon's mark works just as well. In giving her your mark, her lifespan has extended to that of a dragon. And your son is healthy, in case you were wondering."

Veron turns to Alara. Gathering her in his arms, he spins her around and kisses her fiercely. She runs her fingers through his hair and smiles against his lips. "You see, my dragon? We will have a long and beautiful life together, my love."

I'd heard my entire life that dragons are fierce and terrible creatures. Cold and calculating, they care only for gold and treasure. However, watching Veron hold his mate, I realize that this is not true. He stares at her like she is the most precious treasure in the world.

They thank Oradon and turn to me. Veron glances toward the door. "If you will lead us back out, we will leave for our castle immediately. I would prefer my mate be safe in our home while she is nesting."

"Of course," I reply and guide them out into the hallway. A thought occurs to me. "You crossed the veil without a problem, did you not?"

Veron studies me for a moment. "It takes much stronger magic than that to affect me. Why do you ask?"

"And Alara? It does not affect her?"

"She is protected by me because she rides on my back."

"I would ask a favor of you both."

"What is it you would ask of us?" Alara looks at me.

"I cannot cross the veil on my own, and my father will not lift the spell to allow me to travel to the human kingdom. My—" I start to say "my mate" but stop short. Instead, I say, "The woman I love

is human, and she lives in the kingdom of Eryadon. I ask that you please take me to her."

Alara turns to her mate and nods. "We will do this for you, Prince Ryvan."

CHAPTER 36

RYVAN

"Ryvan, you must think about this, my son. You cannot act rashly. Your mating cycle approaches. The flowers on your bed are already beginning to bloom. What if you lose yourself and accidentally harm her because of your powers? She is human, Ryvan, not Fae. She has no magic to balance—"

"Neither does Alara," I counter. "Yet she is mated to a dragon, a creature more powerful than any Light Fae. Never has he harmed her, and now she carries his child. If a dragon can control his dark nature, then surely I can do the same."

Father clenches his jaw. "I only want what is best for you, Ryvan. I have changed the laws regarding the Dark Fae, but there are still some who disagree and believe your kind are too dangerous to be allowed to live. Your whole life, I have wanted only to protect you."

"And you have, Father. Because you have changed the law, now I can protect her and the kingdom. Everyone saw my power, and they did not demand my death because they know that only *I* could defend against a dragon—a creature who could rain down death and destruction upon us all."

Father remains silent because what I say is true. Had my powers been revealed at any other time, I'm almost certain the people would have demanded my execution. However, enough citizens witnessed my defense of the castle against the dragon that they understand my magic may be useful in protecting the kingdom.

Just because a few Dark Fae became dangerous does not mean all of us are. Like everything else, there is a balance. We had forgotten that as a people, but now, that will change.

After all, if a dragon can become a good person, there is hope for everyone, no matter how dark their nature.

My grandfather joins the conversation. "Go with my blessing and that of your father's. Even if he is too stubborn to say it aloud."

My father purses his lips. "My son knows he has my blessing if he wants it."

"Does he?" Eryl asks. "Because it still sounded like you were trying to convince him otherwise."

Father narrows his eyes. "Both of you need to stop putting words in my mouth."

He turns to me and places both hands on my shoulders. "Ryvan, you have my blessing to marry a human female, even though I think it would be wiser not to. But that is simply my opinion." He sighs heavily. "You should follow your heart."

"Thank you, Father."

With that, I make my way out to the courtyard and to the dragon and his mate. I climb onto his back and he lifts into the sky. We fly out toward the forest and the veil; I pray that we find Ella quickly.

CHAPTER 37

ELLA

Light filters in through the window, casting the room in an orange glow. I dress and my gaze turns to my single glass slipper by my bed. I trace my fingers over the crystal as I remember the night of the ball.

A tear slips down my cheek as I swallow against the lump in my throat. I love him… and it's hard to think of him with another. Even if it is for his good.

I sit up in bed and place my hand to my chest as if that will somehow help the terrible ache in my heart. I wonder if this pain will ever go away. I wrap my fingers around the stone pendant as I blink back my tears.

Crying will not bring him back, nor will my sadness. I have to move on, but I do not know how. Part of me wonders if I should leave for Arnafell; start a new life far from here and away from my memories. But another part of me prays that somehow I'll see him again, even as impossible as that may be.

With a heavy sigh, I push down my sadness and raise my hands. I focus on each word as I recite the spell of binding. I have to refresh it twice a day to bind my wicked stepmother and stepsisters so that they remain kind to me, even though they do not want to be this way. Red and purple tendrils of mist hover around my palms, then shoot away with lightning speed to find their targets.

It has only been less than a fortnight since I first cast the spell, but I have noticed its effects beginning to wane. My stepmother's magic is strong. She fights the binding spell each time it is cast, and I worry that eventually it will stop working.

When I make my way downstairs, my stepmother sees me. For a moment, she appears angry. She opens her mouth to speak, but her face twists into an unnatural smile, and she greets me warmly instead. "Ella? Where have you been?"

"Nowhere that I wish to tell you about, Stepmother."

"All right." Her mouth curls in a half-smile that's as strange on her face as I imagine it must feel to her. "Have a lovely day, dear."

"Stepmother?" I call before she walks away. "Mr. Malforn sent another messenger to inquire about the wedding. He is supposed to arrive here today. I have told him many times it is cancelled. But perhaps he needs to hear it from your lips when he arrives."

"Of course."

"And Stepmother?"

"Yes?"

"You and your daughters will be moving upstairs to the servant's quarters. I expect you to be finished removing your things from the lower floor by nightfall. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my dear stepdaughter," she replies, the smile twisting more into a snarl despite her honeyed words.

I suppose I could turn them all out into the street, but they never did that to me, so I do not feel inclined to, either. Besides, I would not wish life in one of the workhouses on anyone. Despite all she and her daughters have done to me, I have no wish to be cruel.

My mind is troubled as I make my way to the garden. I need to figure out what to do if my stepmother is ever able to break through the spell I've cast upon her.

Ten days have passed since I last saw Ryvan. I cannot stop thinking about him. As I sit in the

garden, I touch my fingers to my lips, remembering the feel of his warm mouth on mine. I wrap my fingers around the stone necklace he made for me, feeling the faint pulse of the magic within. It is as if part of him is still here with me. Closing my eyes, I can picture his face so clearly.

"What is the meaning of this?" a man's voice calls out.

My head snaps toward it, and I scowl as soon as my gaze lands upon Mr. Malforn.

His eyes are blood red, full of rage as he rushes toward me.

I raise my hands to conjure a binding spell on him, but too late. He hits me with the back of his hand. Pain explodes across the side of my face as I fall back. I scramble to stand, but he grips my neck in an iron vise, dragging me toward him. "Did you really believe I would just let you go?" he snarls. "You are mine and I will have you as my wife."

He tightens his hand around my throat. My lungs burn, desperate for air as I claw at his arms and hands. Darkness gathers at the edge of my vision as I struggle to break free.

A large shadow passes overhead, and my eyes snap open. My jaw drops when I spot an enormous dragon circling above. His silver scales shimmer as they reflect the light of the sun.

"Ella!" My heart stops at the sound of a familiar voice, and my eyes snap to Ryvan as he flies off the back of the dragon and races toward me.

Malforn relinquishes his grip and I fall to my knees, coughing and sputtering as I draw in great gulping breaths.

Ryvan barrels into Malforn, slamming him to the ground. He wraps his hand tight around his throat as he glares down at him. "How dare you touch her," he grits through his teeth.

"She is my property," Malforn wheezes. "And I have come to collect."

Ryvan's eyes turn into obsidian orbs as he bares his fangs. "She is mine, and you will not touch her."

Without warning, Malforn pulls a knife from his vest and slashes the blade at Ryvan.

In a blur of movement, Ryvan twists the knife from Malforn's hands and plunges it deep into his chest.

Malforn's eyes are wide as blood gushes from the wound. He opens his mouth as if to speak, but only a choked gurgle escapes him.

"You will never touch her again," Ryvan grinds out.

I watch in satisfaction as the light fades from Malforn's eyes, and he stills.

Ryvan turns to me. His eyes are full of panic as he drops to his knees and gathers me in his arms. "Where are you hurt, Ella? Tell me. Please."

He traces his fingers lightly over my bruised neck and face as his eyes brighten with tears. "The protection spell must have worn off," his voice quavers. "Forgive me, my beloved. I should have come for you sooner. I—"

I cup his cheek. "It's all right, Ryvan. I'm fine. You saved me." A tear escapes my lashes. "What are you doing here? I never thought I would see you again."

His eyes are full of pain as they stare down at me. "I could not bear to be apart from you any longer." He drops his forehead gently to mine. "I know you asked me to let you go, but I cannot. You are my heart, Ella."

Tears sting my eyes and blur my vision. "Eryl told me you need a mate with strong Light Magic who can balance your Dark Magic—to help you control it and keep it hidden. I am only human, Ryvan. I cannot protect you like Lorala can."

He gently combs his fingers through my long, chestnut hair. "You worry for me and yet I was always afraid I would be the one to hurt you, Ella. I never feared for myself… I worried only that I

might follow in the path of King Erebyr and bring harm to the one I love most."

Another tear slips down my cheek, but he brushes it away with the soft pad of his thumb as his glowing green eyes stare deep into mine.

"I was wrong, Ella. I will never become like the Dark Fae King of old that everyone feared. I know now that I can control the darkness within me." He pauses. "I know this because of them."

My heart pounds and I watch in stunned silence as he gestures to the silver dragon as it lands in the garden before us. I notice a human woman seated on his back. His green eyes lock onto mine as his vertically slit pupils contract and then expand as he stares down at me.

I draw in a shaking breath. "Ryvan, who is—"

I stop abruptly as the dragon shifts into two-legged form. He catches the woman about the waist with his hands and gently lowers her feet to the ground. She is slight and delicate compared to his massive, muscular form. Her long hair is like spun gold spilling over her shoulders. Her eyes are as blue as the sea. As my gaze travels over her, I note the slight swell of her abdomen and realize she is with child.

Ryvan pulls me up with him to stand. "Ella, do not be afraid. This is Alara and her mate, Veron. They helped me cross the veil to find you."

He turns to Veron and his human mate. "Veron is the dragon the burned the city of Bryndor to ash."

I inhale sharply. Everyone knows of Bryndor and the devastation visited upon it by dragon fire. Although it was many years ago, the city has never fully recovered. As I stare at Veron, his arm wrapped protectively around Alara, I can hardly believe he is the same dragon that committed such a terrible crime.

"He is changed," Alara says, answering my unspoken question.

As I study her and Veron, the realization hits me. "You are the cursed dragon by the sea, are you not? And you"—I turn to Alara—"escaped, and he nearly destroyed your village trying to get you back."

"I did not escape. Veron let me go to see my sister. The stories were mistaken." Alara smiles warmly at me as she leans into Veron. "I am happy with my dragon mate, and we have finally come to an understanding with the King of Eryadon, though it seems the rumors still persist. I assure you; my husband no longer burns down cities searching for treasure."

He wraps his wing possessively around her as he places a tender kiss on her temple. "I do not need to search for gold and wealth when I have the greatest treasure in the world right here in my arms."

She rests her hand on her slightly rounded abdomen, and he does the same, curling his tail around her ankle. Veron's gaze meets mine. "Alara balances me—the good and the bad. Before I met her, I cared not for the lives of any but mine. She showed me a different path. Because of her, I no longer succumb to my darker instincts. I love her and I would never harm her."

Ryvan takes my hand, drawing my attention back to him. "Do you not see? Dragons are powerful beings. Evenly matched to Dark Fae in their powers of destruction and ruin. When I met him, I realized that if a dragon is able to control his dark nature, I would never be capable of harming you. You are my heart, Ella. I know now that I am strong enough to balance the darkness within me, my beloved."

A broken sob escapes me. "But if I am not enough to help you find balance… if you were discovered, they'd put you to death, my love."

A smile tilts his lips. "My people already found out what I am." His gaze darts to the dragon. "When Veron came to Anara, I thought he meant to attack us. I fought him before I realized he had not

come to wreak havoc and ruin. Over half the guards of the castle witnessed me use my Dark Magic to defend the kingdom." He pauses. "They know I am Dark Fae."

Hope fills me. "They know and they did not try to—"

"The law against Dark Fae is already changed," he explains. "Before the evil reign of King Erebyr, Dark Fae used to be the Kingdom's greatest warriors. My people were reminded of this when none but me could stand against a dragon."

Taking my hand, he drops to one knee. "Please, Ella, return with me to my kingdom. I love you and no other. Please, accept me. I am already yours, my love. And I long for you to be mine."

Happiness blooms in my chest as I smile down at him. "I accept you, my love."

He stands and gathers me in his arms. He spins me around in a slow circle as I touch his face, reassuring myself that he is really here and I am not just dreaming.

His glowing green eyes stare deep into mine a moment before he seals his mouth over my own in a claiming kiss.

Veron clears his throat, startling us both. My cheeks flare with heat as we turn to face him.

"Would you like us to take you back to the veil?" he asks

"Yes," Ryvan answers. He turns to me and pulls my missing slipper from his satchel. He hands it to me. "Before we leave, you will need your enchanted slippers. Until we are bonded, they will allow you to remain in Anara. Once you are mine, the magic that protects our kingdom will recognize you belong to it as well."

I rush back into the house and retrieve my other slipper. When I come back outside, he bids me sit down on a bench in the garden.

Ryvan kneels before me and gently guides the glass slippers onto my feet. When he is finished, he takes my hand and presses a tender kiss to my knuckles as he smiles up at me.

He turns his gaze toward the house and then arches a brow. "Your stepmother? Your stepsisters?"

I grasp my stone necklace. "I used a binding spell on them, forcing them to be kind to me."

He clenches his jaw. "It will not last once you are gone."

Veron steps forward. "Ryvan told me that your stepmother is a blood witch. They are dangerous enemies to have."

I understand the unspoken question behind their words, but I cannot bring myself to order her death.

As if my very words have summoned her, she walks out into the garden. She does not bother to conceal her true form as she stands before us.

Veron and Ryvan growl low in their throats as my stepmother smiles sweetly at me, revealing two rows of sharp goblin teeth. "If you leave, I will search for you and I will make you pay for enslaving me with this enchantment, my dear Ella."

Her words sound kind despite the threat behind them. It is easy to see that the enchantment is already beginning to wane. I've not renewed it this afternoon yet as I normally do. She continues. "I will hunt each of you down for daring to cross me, and—"

Veron shifts into his dragon form in an instant. Opening his mouth, he releases a stream of fire, burning her to ash.

My jaw drops as I stare gaping.

His eyes burn with anger before he turns to his mate, his expression one of guilt.

Alara reaches up to run her hand along his massive jaw. He closes his eyes and leans into her touch as she whispers. "It's all right. I understand why you did it." She places her other hand on her stomach. "You were protecting us and our child, my love."

When he turns back to us, he kneels for his mate to climb onto his back.

Ryvan wraps his strong hands around my form and lifts me up, settling me over the space between Veron's shoulders as he takes the seat behind me. He wraps one arm around my waist and pulls me back into his chest.

Once we are all settled, Veron flexes and extends his wings. They billow out like great sails as he lifts off, ascending up into the clouds. We're so far up, I'd probably be frightened if not for Ryvan holding me. I trust that he would never allow me to fall.

The castle guards watch Veron warily as we land in the courtyard. A smile tugs at my lips because this is a welcome distraction. Instead of all eyes on the Dark Fae Prince and his human mate, everyone is observing the dragon and *his* human mate.

As Ryvan lifts me off Veron's back, Alara climbs down to bid us goodbye.

I embrace her warmly. "Thank you for everything."

I turn to Veron. Unsure that a hug would be appropriate for a dragon, I simply thank him as well.

He dips his massive horned head in acknowledgement.

"It would be lovely to see you both again sometime," I offer.

"I would like that, as well." Alara cradles her stomach. "I would like our child to have many friends and allies as he grows. He will be the first of his kind, as far as we know."

We watch them fly off until they disappear into the clouds.

When we can no longer see them, Ryvan turns to me and flashes a handsome smile. "Come. I am eager for you to meet my father and grandfather. Eryl will be glad to see you again as well."

I loop mine arm through his and the guards bow low before us as we enter the castle.

CHAPTER 38

RYVAN

It has only been a few days since Ella crossed the veil. As I stand before her, surrounded by a field of glowing purple lavender, my heart is full. This is exactly like my vision.

She is dressed in a long, silken white gown. Her hair is twisted in a lovely, braided crown atop her head, a few long, spiraling tendrils framing her delicate, heart-shaped face. My gaze travels over her softly rounded ears and the many small spots that dot her cheeks and the bridge of her nose as she smiles at me. Her blue eyes meet mine and my heart pounds. She is perfect, my beloved, and I still can hardly believe she is mine.

Mirna stands off to the side. Purple flowers adorn her mane and tail. Ella insisted she be here for our ceremony. Her soft voice whispers in my mind. *"I am happy for you, Ryvan. You have chosen well."*

I dip my chin to her in a subtle nod.

Word has spread far and wide throughout the kingdom that I—the Dark Fae Prince—have chosen a human as my bride. Father worried that this news would be met with fear, but it seems the story of my facing down a dragon with my powers has assuaged much of their concern.

There was a time in our history when the Dark Fae were known as defenders of the kingdom. Perhaps now we will see those days to us returned.

My father gives his blessing and the crowd is silent as they observe.

Ella's luminous blue eyes pierce mine as I place a wreath of white flowers atop her head. I bow low, and she responds in kind. I take both her hands in mine and repeat the ancient words of the bonding ceremony aloud. "You are mine, and I am yours."

I wait with great anticipation as she speaks her vows in return. "I am yours, and you are mine." She wraps her arms around me, pressing her lips to mine in a tender kiss.

I smile as I watch Eryl try to dance with Ella at our reception. She trips him up so many times he finally lifts her into his arms and then flies them above the ballroom floor instead, swirling and dancing among the other couples doing the same.

When he returns her to me, her face is flushed a lovely pink hue from the excitement as she smiles brightly. I gather her in my arms and arch a brow. "Shall we dance?"

She nods and I wait expectantly for her to step onto my feet. Holding her closely, I spin her around as we whirl and dance across the floor. Her smiles and her laughter fill me with such joy, I can hardly contain my own.

When the evening is over, my father and grandfather walk over to us. They each embrace her warmly. "Welcome to the family, my daughter," Father says, and I find myself swallowing against a sudden lump in my throat.

When we retire to my chambers, I cannot deny that I am slightly nervous. The effects of my mating

cycle fill me with need unlike anything I have ever known. I want only to be gentle with my bondmate; I worry that I may hurt her.

As we stand before one another, she carefully slips off her dress, leaving her entire body bare before my eyes and I do the same.

My heart stutters and stops in my chest as my gaze travels over her. Now that she stands before me, I am almost afraid to touch her. I tremble with want and desire, and I struggle to maintain my control. My desire for her is so great it is almost overwhelming.

My stav is erect and painfully hard with want to sheathe myself deep inside her warmth.

Ella reaches out and takes my hand, threading her fingers through mine.

Reaching across, I brush the hair back from her face and gently run the soft pad of my thumb over her cheek. “You are perfect,” I whisper.

She takes my hand and places it over her left breast before her eyes drift down to my stav. Softly biting her lower lip, she gently touches my length. A shiver of pleasure runs through my body, but I force myself to remain still as the tips of her fingers trace lightly over my sensitive skin.

A bead of liquid gathers on the end and I clench my jaw as desire and longing burn through me. I long to mark her and bind her to me in all ways.

“Make love to me, Ryvan,” she whispers. “Make me yours.”

I gather her in my arms and gently lower her onto the bed. I lay down beside her and observe as her gaze travels over the flowering vines that wind up the posts and the headboard. I explained to her how they only bloom during the mating cycle.

I am uncertain if it is the effect of the cycle on my biology or if it is the way she is staring up at me now. But as I brush the hair back from her face, I long to fill her with my essence and have my seed take root deep in her womb.

I gather her in my arms and roll her beneath me, longing to join our bodies as one.

CHAPTER 39

ELLA

He wraps me in his arms and wings as he claims my mouth in a searing kiss, stealing the breath from my lungs.

"Say you are mine, my beloved," he breathes into my mouth.

"I'm yours," I barely manage between kisses.

His hands are everywhere all at once, and I cannot stop touching him either. His stav is a hard bar between us. I inhale sharply as he rolls his hips against mine. I want him so badly.

He reaches down to touch my cheek. His pupils are blown wide so that only a thin rim of green is barely visible around the edges. I watch as his canines extend into sharpened points.

"Ella, I long to give you my mark and bind you to me in the ways of my people. But I do not want to hurt you."

I press a finger to his lips and cup the back of his neck, pulling his mouth back down to mine. "I trust you. I love you, Ryvan."

He kisses me, long and deep. When he pulls back, his mouth drifts open and he stares down at me in wonder as he smooths his hand down the length of my body.

"You are perfect, Ella," he breathes.

I run my hands over the hard planes of muscle along his abdomen and chest. I allow my gaze to drift down to his stav. It's hard and erect, and liquid beads at the tip. I reach out and tentatively touch him, surprised that he is so large my fingers do not quite meet around him.

He groans as I trace my hand along his length, noting the ridges that line his shaft and the thicker base. More liquid gathers on the tip. When I swipe my thumb over his crown, a rumbling purr starts in his chest. He drops his head to the curve of my neck and shoulder. "I want you, Ella. I want to seal you to me. Are you sure you want me, my love?"

I cup his cheek and force his glowing green eyes to mine. "More than anything, Ryvan."

He seals his mouth over mine and then kisses a heated trail down the length of my body. He slides his hands up my thighs and gently parts my knees, baring me to his gaze. He dips his tongue between my folds, and I gasp as he brushes his tongue over the small bundle of nerves at the top.

His rumbling purr sounds in response, and I arch against him at the delicious sensation that moves through me.

I run my fingers through his hair, holding him in place as he teases his tongue over the sensitive pearl of flesh. My entire body goes taut like a bowstring and then I'm coming, harder than I ever have before.

I'm not even fully recovered before he moves back up my body, settling between my thighs. "Forgive me, Ella. I can wait no longer."

He reaches between us and aligns his stav with my entrance. His gaze holds mine, and the breath stutters from my lungs as he slowly enters me.

He clenches his jaw and it is easy to see he is struggling to maintain his control.

At first, it feels tight and uncomfortable like I've always heard it would. When he pushes through my barrier, I inhale sharply, and he stills.

Tears escape my lashes. He reaches down and touches my cheek. "Ella, am I hurting you?"

"I just need a moment to adjust," I whisper.

He gently brushes the tears away and presses tender kisses to my cheeks, brow, and nose. After a

moment, my body relaxes around him, and I encourage him to continue.

He rocks his hips back and forth, gently advancing until his stav is completely sheathed inside me. Tight heat blooms deep in my core, but when he shifts his hips, the pain disappears and becomes only pleasure.

I cling to him as he begins a slow rhythm. I trace my hands over his back, enjoying the movement of his muscles beneath the tips of my fingers with each flex of his hips.

He stares down at me, his green eyes full of desire and possession. "You are mine, Ella."

The delicious friction of his stav as he moves in my channel is almost more than I can bear. Closing my eyes, my head falls back as I surrender myself to sensation. He touches my face, drawing my attention back to him.

"I want to watch you as you find your release, Ella."

His gaze holds mine as each stroke lengthens and deepens. Desire coils tight in my core. I can feel his stav begin to expand as he knots deep inside me. I'm so full it's almost to the point of pain, but not quite.

My toes curl as his control begins to slip and his pace quickens. I wrap my arms and legs tighter around his form as he thrusts into me. Each stroke becoming longer, more forceful and deeper.

Fire sparks deep within and my release roars through me. I cry out his name as wave after wave of pleasure moves through my entire body.

Without warning, he drops his head to the curve of my neck and sinks his fangs deep into my flesh. The pain morphs into pleasure when his stav begins to pulse as he erupts deep inside my channel, filling me with his seed.

The delicious warmth feels infinite and triggers another orgasm, this one even stronger than the last.

When he pulls back, he laves his tongue over the two puncture wounds. He collapses on top of me, then rolls us onto our sides, remaining knotted within me. He lightly brushes his fingers across my face, staring at me as if I were a rare and precious treasure.

He pulls me even closer, wrapping his wings possessively around my form. "You are mine," he whispers against my lips. "And I am yours."

His hands continue to move over me as if he cannot stop touching me. I do the same, reassuring myself this is real.

After a while, his knot finally ebbs, and he carefully withdraws from my body. When he does, his nostrils flare, and his eyes fill with panic. "You are bleeding. I hurt you."

My heart clenches at the pain in his expression. I cup his cheek. "No. It's normal to bleed the first time. You didn't hurt me. I'm fine, my love."

He hugs me tightly to his chest, tugging the blankets around us both. He wraps me in his arms again. His wings fold around me a moment later, and I snuggle into his warmth.

His stav is still hard and erect between us as I meet his gaze. "You want me again so soon?"

He presses his lips to mine. "Always."

When I wake in the morning, I notice all the details I've missed in this room before. Before last night, I was sleeping in guest chambers down the hallway and Ryvan would stay with me there, holding me the past few nights until our ceremony yesterday.

These chambers, although large, are furnished comfortably. Tapestries hang on each wall, depicting Fae dressed in elegant clothing and soldiers ready for battle. An intricately carved wooden desk and chair sit in one corner. A fireplace is set into the opposite wall near the bed, a fire burning in the hearth. Ryvan must have lit the fire last night while I slept.

I gaze up at the four-poster bed and note the strange vines that wind up each post. They are covered in delicate, white, glowing flowers. I touch one, and the soft petals curl around my finger.

"These are lovely."

He nuzzles my temple. "They only bloom during my mating cycle. When it is over, they release a light dusting of pollen then slowly fade away." He peers at me curiously. "Do humans not have anything like this?"

"No."

"Perhaps it is because my people are so connected to nature. Our magic suffuses everything in our kingdom."

He rolls me beneath him, and his nostrils flare. When his eyes snap open, they are filled with desire. "Your scent," he rasps. "It is maddening. I need you, my Ella."

He takes me again, but this time more slowly and gently as if he is worshipping and memorizing every inch of my body.

His stav expands as he knots deep inside me. The small muscles of my channel quiver and flex around him as I come, and he fills me with his essence.

When we make love a third time, my body tightens around him as I find my release. I cry out his name, and he pulses deep inside me.

He collapses. I love the sensation of his weight as he covers me, pinning me to the mattress beneath him. With wonder, I watch the delicate flowers release their pollen in a fine cloud of dust falling around us. He lifts his head and frowns at the pollen floating and settling.

I cup his cheek. "What is wrong?"

"It is strange," he murmurs. "They are supposed to last at least three days."

I'm about to ask him why, but he captures my mouth in a searing kiss. When he pulls back, his gaze speaks of love and devotion. "I can hardly wait to show you everything about our kingdom, Ella. There is so much I want to share with you, my beloved."

EPILOGUE

A few months have passed, but I still can hardly believe this is my life. I wake in the arms of my husband—my *bondmate*, I mentally correct myself. With his wings wrapped possessively around me, he tugs me closer.

He runs his fingers through my hair as his gaze holds mine, his brow furrowed slightly. "I feel very protective of you, Ella. As if I cannot bear the thought of you leaving my sight even for a moment. I do not understand why."

I nestle into him. "Then let's just stay in bed all day. I'm tired anyway, and I love sleeping here with you, wrapped up in your arms and wings."

He flares his nostrils and gently nuzzles at my temple, moving down my neck. "Your scent," he breathes as he presses a soft kiss to my skin. "It is so strong it is maddening."

He closes his mouth over my breast, and I arch into him, riding the ripples of pleasure he sends straight to my core. He continues down my body, pressing a line of kisses down my abdomen, then stills.

His stillness concerns me. "Ryvan?"

He lifts his gaze to mine, his eyes bright with tears.

"I believe you are carrying our child."

I sit up on my elbows. "What? How do you know?"

"That would explain why your scent is so strong, and why I feel so protective of you."

I think back, counting the days that I have been here. I haven't had my monthly cycle since I moved into the castle, and I should have had at least two by now.

I place my hand over my abdomen as tears prick my eyes. "A child," I whisper more to myself than to him.

"Does this upset you?" he asks, his expression full of concern.

A tear escapes my lashes as a warm smile curves my mouth. "No."

He kisses my stomach and moves back up my body. He splays his palm over my abdomen and presses a tender kiss to my lips as he stares down at me, his gaze full of love and devotion.

"What about you?" I search his glowing green eyes. "Does this make you happy, my love?"

He smiles against my lips. "More than words can say."

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